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The Evolution of Cable Network Branding: Time Warner in the Post-Network Era, 2001-2011

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by

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ABSTRACT

From 2001 to 2011, there were a number of significant changes, such as increased audience fragmentation and new media technologies, which impacted the television industry and continue to threaten the financial strength and success of cable television networks. The cable television industry employed branding as a major combatant to manage such challenges. Branding is the most important tool in the post-network era, yet networks use it in ways that challenge previously held scholarly assumptions about the cable television industry. Cable television network branding functions in two main ways – one as a performance intended for competitors, distributors, and other key industry players; and two as a means of rationalization, essentially a tool that network executives can wield whenever they want or need to justify a decision, action or behavior.

Through interviews with television industry executives, attendance at major industry events and an analysis of trade publications, I examine the branding and promotional strategies of TBS, TNT and HBO. Industrial strategies in the post-network era are fragile and uncertain with regards to technology, partnerships, economics, programming and distribution. Thus, cable networks turn to branding as a mechanism to work through institutional, industrial, economic and technological issues that have been and continue to shift. In this analysis of how and why cable networks use branding, I explore the currently evolving post-network era and television's future.

INDEX WORDS: Television studies, Cable television, Branding, Media industry studies, Cultural studies, Post-network era, Non-linear television, New media

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DARCEY WEST

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Claude Cain, my grandfather. He was the strongest person I've ever known and taught me the most important things in life are to work hard, always tell the truth, love passionately, and serve God.

It is also dedicated to my best friend and mother, Claudia Ritchie. All good things in my life are because of you – this dissertation and degree especially. You have always been and continue to be my rock. Thank you.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation conducts a case study of Time-Warner, Inc. from 2001 to 2011 as a means of examining the post-network era branding strategies employed by general entertainment networks (TBS, TNT), premium networks (HBO), and cable network-initiated web ventures (TV Everywhere, HBO Go). Its scope extends from the start of the AOL-Time Warner merger 2001 to the launch of the first cable network mobile streaming application, HBO Go, in 2011. The rise of new technologies such as DVRs, online streaming services, and mobile viewing applications contributed to major changes in audience behavior during the first decade of the 2000s; this dissertation shows some key ways that the cable industry responded with experiments in programming and promotional strategies.

The development of these challenges coincided with and propelled an increase in profits and prominence for the cable television industry within what Amanda Lotz (2007) terms the "post-network era." Lotz (2007) argues that in the mid-2000s, a new era of television arose – an era that we have only begun to understand and that hasn't been fully realized yet. These developments require a re-examination of many commonly held assumptions about the television industry, its economics, and its relationship the audiences. With this dissertation, I use cable network branding as a vehicle to chronicle this new era (2001-2011) and investigate changes in the cable's industry structure, economics, and cultural practices. Branding is a process that operates at the micro-level, manages the relationship between consumers and producers, and functions as an interface between employees and the companies they work for as well as between a television network's audience and its programming. Branding, as employed by cable network executives, has served as a tool used discursively to deal with post-network era challenges facing the television industry and to justify any network decision or choice. For this reason, it is necessary to foreground the economic and cultural dimensions of the use of branding by cable networks. A detailed history and analysis of contemporary cable branding practices and discourses serves as an excellent lens through which we can explore the economic, industrial, and social processes of the post-network era.

Branding has been a primary way that the cable television industry pushed back against the many challenges of the post-network era[1], such as audience fragmentation, new media technologies, and changes in viewing behavior. Studying branding enables an analysis of this specific sociohistoric moment of volatility and disruption. Branding can be seen to work in two major ways. First, it is a performance enacted to communicate with key industry figures, competitors, distributors, and content creators. Branding, particularly in the form of industry talk, must not be taken at face value, but must be scrutinized and critically analyzed for meaning. The second way branding works in the cable television industry is as rationalization for industrial practices. Executives assert the network brand to justify any decision or behavior deemed necessary. I will interrogate both of these functions of branding throughout this dissertation as they relate to the economic, cultural, and content strategies and philosophies of TBS, TNT, and HBO. To conduct the research for this project, I used two main methods: one, observation at

[1] Amanda Lotz (2007) is credited with defining the current "post-network era" of television. Television is divided into three different eras based upon changes in programming and distribution. The "classic network era" occurred from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s and describes the time when three basic broadcast networks dominated television. The "multi-channel transition era" took place from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s at a time when cable television channels emerged and gained popularity. In the mid-2000s, we entered the post-network era, which Lotz (2007) explains as when "changes in competitive norms and operation of the industry have become too profound for old practices to be preserved; different industrial practices are becoming dominant and replacing those of the network era" (8). Changes in the ways audiences consume television, such as mobile and online viewing and digital video recorders, along with numerous financing options and the availability of content are major features of this era.

industry events, and two, narrative analysis of interviews with cable executives, coverage in trade publications, and network promotional materials.

With individual case studies on TBS, TNT, HBO, and mobile/online viewing applications, this dissertation focuses on basic cable's move *away* from niche audiences and narrowcasting; shifts in the branding and promotions activities of premium cable networks such as HBO; and the ways that media companies have attempted to reposition themselves as internet channels in the contemporary cable environment. Focusing on these specific issues, I examine how branding works in unique ways for the different types of networks that exist under the Time Warner corporate umbrella and uncover the complexities of how network branding works within one large media conglomerate. In so doing, I expand upon Lotz's (2007) work while also challenging some of her theories, including her claim that cable networks have increasingly focused on targeting niches in the post-network era. Rather, branding and programming have broadened their messaging and reach and expanded their target demographics to cope with the declining ratings and ad revenue resulting from a more fragmented audience. I also draw heavily from Johnson's (2011) foundational work on television branding, at the same time that I challenge her limited criticism and the fact that she doesn't question branding messages and analyze the meanings and motivations beneath the surface. While branding is central to the cable television industry in the post-network era, it does not function the way that many industry scholars, including Johnson (2011), claim. Such scholars often take brands at face value when they rely too heavily on industry speak. Instead, cable network executives manipulate brands, using them as empty signifiers to fight against the uncertainty of the post-network era. This is the case, for example, with expansive brands that carry broad, mainstream appeal like "comedy" or "drama."

As branding is a subject media industry studies scholars are just beginning to explore, a study of this scope, which explores how branding strategies operate across the different properties of one media conglomerate, has not yet been done. By focusing on media channels owned by the same conglomerate, I am better able to interrogate the overlaps and divergences between different categories of TV brands. This, in turn, enables a more nuanced picture of cable network branding practices and discourses in the post-network era. In addition, my overall discussion of cable branding and promotion serves as a historiography of the post-network era. As such, it fills an additional gap in existing television studies and media industries research. Lotz (2007) establishes the start of the post-network era at the mid-2000s, and it is still unfolding today, but my ten year focus enables us to more closely assess the individual changes of specific networks. By defining my parameters to consist of 2001 to 2011, I am able to analyze the end of the multichannel transition era, the rise of the post-network era, and key developments that have occurred during the first several years of the post-network era.

1.1 Background

This dissertation is a contemporary history of cable television network branding in the post-network era, and a major goal of my analysis is to examine how branding strategies have changed in the post-network era from the multichannel era. To do so, it is important to provide context and offer a history of branding strategies prior to when my study begins in 2001. For example, one major assumption about the cable television industry is that its branding model involves "narrowcasting," which refers to programming and branding a network towards a specific niche demographic (e.g , MTV is for music lovers, or History is for history buffs). In the post-network era, I no longer see niche targeting as such a dominant practice. However, before I illustrate how conditions have changed, I look at the strategies of the past in the next sub-section. Few scholarly studies thus far have examined the evolution of cable branding strategies, how they operate in the evolving post-network era specifically, or why some have been abandoned, altered, or recycled in the 2000s. These are among the gaps in the research I address with this project.

The success of cable television is undeniable today, and Time Warner's contributions throughout the industry's history and into its future are unlike any of its competitors. As profits from its film and print publication investments continued to decline and these divisions struggled, the cable network arm of the conglomerate has supported its bottom-line and promised a financially secure future. In 2014, Time Warner's cable networks comprised 58% of its total revenue (Time Warner Annual Report). Of course, Time Warner was not always invested in cable television, and the trajectory of its complicated past is anything but typical. Over the course of its almost one-hundred-year history, Time, Inc. joined with or acquired several major media companies in Warner Communications, HBO, Turner Broadcasting, and America Online. In this sub-section, I examine the history of Time Warner overall, as well as the specific histories of Turner Broadcasting and HBO, in order to provide a foundation for my analysis of changes in corporate strategies. In subsequent chapters, I more fully analyze each network's branding strategies, distinct corporate cultures, and recent developments such as new media technologies.

1.1.1. Evolution of Branding

Branding in the post-network era is the focus of this study, but there is a long history of differences between strategies used by broadcast networks versus cable. It is important to be mindful of past practices because many are still entrenched in the television industry structure today. In addition, in the 2000s, basic cable networks like TBS and TNT have made strategic moves aimed to help them become the "broadcast of cable," so an overview of the peculiarities of that facet of the TV industry is necessary to foreground. Finally, basic cable networks are still intertwined with broadcast networks due to the need for syndication licensing deals, and networks like TBS and TNT have begun to give a second life to canceled broadcast programs like *Southland* (2009-2013), *Cougar Town* (2009-2015), and Conan O'Brien's late night show, which came to TBS from the broadcast network NBC. The dynamics between the three types of networks – broadcast, basic cable, and premium cable – have been shifting in significant ways as the entire industry is in flux, but we must first understand the historical context before we can fully understand the complexities and changes of the post-network era.

1.1.2. Broadcast Network Branding

By the launch of television in the 1940s, the network brands CBS and NBC were familiar fixtures in American households from their days in radio, and thus enjoyed a smooth transition as their programming and stars moved easily from radio to television. Because the broadcast networks, from their inception, produced mainstream programs suitable for all audiences, establishing a clear, unique brand was not a priority. The historic lack of differentiated programming made it difficult to create a single, unified concept or personality around which to organize a brand identity for the "Big Three" broadcast networks; however, there have been small exceptions. The CBS "Eye" first appeared on-air on November 16, 1951, "…symboliz[ing] the awesome power of images projected through air into every home" (qtd. in Lury, 2004, 89). The NBC peacock emerged in 1956 to denote NBC's color programming and eventually became a reminder the triumph of NBC's parent company, RCA, in the battle over color television technology. Throughout the 1950s, '60s and '70s, CBS was known as "The Tiffany Network" for its exceptional news programming and "quality television" (for example, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972-1978)). For the most part, however, the broadcast networks had little need for branding until the mid-1990s when cable television and the more narrowly-targeted Fox broadcast network began siphoning off audience share, particularly younger, more affluent viewers who were most attractive to advertisers (such as the similar efforts by the networks UPN and The WB, which also rose to prominence in the '90s). According to Caldwell (2004), these challenges led to a series of takeovers and mergers with conglomerates as well as an increased attention on branding, such as the ABC Yellow Campaign and the NBC 2000 campaign.

The 1997 ABC Yellow Campaign garnered a great deal of media attention. The campaign featured yellow promos with ironic, postmodern slogans meant to "…salute those intermingled twinges of guilt and pleasure felt by most Americans as they watch television" (Elliott, 1998). Messages read: "Don't worry. You've got billions of brain cells," "The couch is your friend," and "You can talk to your wife anytime." The irreverent ads were targeted at a younger demographic, a group the network was struggling to appeal to at the time. The most extensive broadcast network branding attempt up to the year 1994 was NBC's "NBC 2000" campaign, according to Caldwell (2004), which heavily influenced practices at ABC and CBS. NBC, following Fox's lead, instructed its affiliates to drop the "K" or "W" before the station name and use numbers instead, such as "NBC4," in an effort to strength the association with NBC. Caldwell (2004) frames this change as an attempt by the broadcast network to streamline network branding and exert corporate control over the member stations. The network was also the first to use its logo during programs and to cancel breaks between shows to seamlessly carry the audience from one program to the next. Another successful NBC branding campaign was its "Must See TV" promotion, which effectively branded Thursday evening programming by blocking sitcoms together as appointment viewing. Thus, while there wasn't much that unified

NBC's programming overall, the network used scheduling techniques to create and advertise genre nights as a branding strategy. Today, broadcast branding strategies focus on encouraging viewer engagement through social media and utilize the internet as a promotional tool because in the post-network era, "…the relationship of [viewers] to television goes beyond actual viewing practices" (Banet-Weiser, 2009, 87).

Cable networks have also employed social media and the internet for branding purposes, which will be discussed in the fourth as well as the final chapter. The marketing efforts by broadcast networks in the post-network era are not the focus of this project. Instead, I find the cultural and industrial role that branding plays in cable television to be more sophisticated and impactful in its effect on broadcast as well as the media industry more broadly. This is in part due to the simple fact that cable networks far outnumber broadcast as well as the increasing economic importance of cable networks to media conglomerates. Though branding is less important for broadcast, programming on the cable and broadcast networks have historically influenced one another. Quality television, which will be discussed in chapter three, originated on broadcast television; though after the 1970 Fin/Syn rules, it became less prominent. Cable television networks, most notably HBO, built off that programming approach, and due to its resurgence and popularity, broadcast networks in recent years have attempted to emulate the quality dramas pioneered by HBO, such as *The Good Wife* (2009-current) on CBS, which premiered in 2009.

1.1.3. Cable Network Branding

Television branding is inextricably connected to programming, and this is especially true for cable television. Building on work by Mullen (2003) and Turow (1997) who detail the history of cable network branding, I argue there are two main stages of development for cable branding strategies – the multichannel era and the post-network era. The following table highlights the differences between the two eras based upon work by Lotz (2007), Mullen (2003), and Turow (1997) and also includes some of the findings from my research that I will analyze further in the proceeding chapters:

Table 1.1 Multichannel Era vs. Post-Network Era

	Multichannel Era	**Post-Network Era**
General Characteristics	• Began in mid-1980s • Rise of cable television • New technologies: VCR and remote control • Programming based on syndicated broadcast reruns	• Began in early-2000s • New media technologies: DVR, Roku • Online and mobile viewing • Time and place shifting • Increased audience fragmentation • More focus on original series
Branding Strategies	• Narrowcasting to niche demographics • Use of "framing" strategies to frame broadcast shows for the cable network: bumpers, ID spots, marathons, hosted programs • Use of on-screen logos	• "Bugs" are more common • Branding targets more viewers • Less reliant on narrowcasting • Broader programming scope • Goal is to increase size of audience, ratings, and/or ad revenue

In the early days of the multichannel era, cable programming was more about what was available to air in syndication than what best fit a determined brand identity for the network. During that first period, cable networks subsisted almost entirely on syndicated series previously aired on broadcast along with blockbuster movies used to fill the schedule. Cable networks had to creatively reinterpret such programming to suit their nascent brands. As Mullen (2003) explains, this imitation of the broadcast model occurred for both economic and cultural reasons. What she means by this is that recycling programming worked because it helped cable networks recoup "high start-up costs" and viewers were not interested in making "radical changes [to their] viewing habits" so too much deviation from established genres were perceived as alienating the audience (Mullen, 2003, p. 152). Audiences were already familiar with broadcast genres and programs, so executives saw their use as an easy transition to reruns of old network hits such as *Gilligan's Island* (1964-1967) and *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) – two shows that helped shape the early identity of TBS in the 1970s through the late 1990s (Kompare, 2004).

At first, cable programming amounted to what content a network could secure distribution rights for or what libraries a company owned and thus had easy access to, and thus the purpose of cable branding at this early stage was to reframe previously viewed content. For example, Turner bought the MGM/UA library in 1986 and went on to acquire more programming sources such as New Line Cinema, Castle Rock Entertainment, and Hanna-Barbera Productions. His company also secured distribution rights for most of the Atlanta sports teams (if it didn't outright own them), which branded his networks as the place for Atlanta sports. TNT, which Turner created in 1988, "became a popular distribution outlet for this treasure trove of movies and its heavily-promoted *Gone with the Wind* showings helped launch the network" (Mullen, 2003, p. 164). Turner's strategy ensured that his cable networks had a vast array of content to draw from, yet also supported the idea that cable networks existed primarily to retransmit broadcast fare, albeit framed to more specific niches.

As stated above, from the industry's early days, cable repackaged previously-released content to frame it in a way, as Mullen (2003) calls it, that best complemented their network brand and distinguished them from the competition. This was necessary because the cable networks needed to redefine the syndicated reruns so they were clearly associated with the cable brand, rather than the broadcast network the programs were aired on in their initial run. Mullen (2003) describes the attempt by cable networks to reposition syndicated content as "framing" and asserts that this strategy involves three main branding strategies: bumpers and ID spots, marathons, and hosted programs. "Bumpers and ID spots" are promotional commercials that reframe an off-net broadcast program to fit the cable network's brand, and they are still popular strategies today. One example she provides of this strategy in the multichannel era is the Lifetime Network's ad campaign for *L.A. Law* (1986-1994) reruns with taglines calling the male characters "hunks." In contrast, original ads for this program on its broadcast network, NBC, focused on the ensemble cast, complex character development, and dramatic storylines. Lifetime, however, targeted female viewers and wanted to find a way to appeal to them with a uniquely "feminine" message.

The second strategy employed by cable networks in the multichannel era to repurpose a syndicated program involved airing marathons of a given show for several hours, sometimes several days in a row. One way this worked was as a counterprogramming strategy, which means airing a program for a different demographic than competing networks attracted. For example, TBS could schedule a marathon of old episodes of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) while the Super Bowl aired on another network. A second function of marathoning was a practice called a "sheltered launch" of a spin-off network. For example, before Turner Entertainment launched its Cartoon Network, sister channel TBS ran cartoon marathons to promote the new channel.

Finally, the third framing strategy of the multichannel era involved the use of "hosted programs," essentially serving as a program within a program. I discuss the updated version of this in the next chapter, but first, I will provide historical context. TNT in the 1990s presented a weekly showcase titled "Our Favorite Movies" that featured films such as *Diner* and *The Magnificent Seven*, paired with a celebrity host who interjected trivia and commentary during commercial breaks. For *Diner*, the film's star, Kevin Bacon, hosted the showing and shared stories of his experiences making the movie. This was a way to connect the TNT network to the movie while asserting TNT's brand as a cable channel for film fanatics and making the presentation its own.

These were not the only branding strategies used by cable networks in the multichannel era. Despite the fact that most cable programming at the time was syndicated content aside from a few early dabbles in original series such as *The Catlins* that unsuccessfully aired on TBS from 1982 to 1984, there were other ways to promote and define a network. Joseph Turow (1997) outlined three main branding strategies for cable networks from the 1980s to 1990s: 1) "the consistent use of logos and other on-screen promotions, 2) a selection of 'compatible' reruns, and 3) signature shows" (qtd. in Mullen, 2003, p. 155). While he spoke of the multichannel era specifically, these strategies still hold true today. On-screen logos, such as a small "TBS" written on a bottom corner of the screen, are called "bugs" and help remind viewers which network they're watching. Bugs are more common during the post-network era, the second stage of cable branding, than ever before, prompting some networks even to sell that space to advertisers – a strategy that will be examined in the next chapter. Reruns are also still used, and are featured in conjunction with many of the strategies Mullen (2003) detailed. Signature shows are original programming produced or purchased by the cable network for exclusive access to first runs, such as *Law and Order* (1990-2010) on TNT and later, *The Closer* (2005-2012). Like on-screen logos, these are also used more frequently in the post-network era as original programming became a necessity for cable networks; they are trend I analyze in chapters two and three of this dissertation. There, I identify and examine any additional branding strategies that changed or evolved throughout the first phase of the post-network era.

It would be a blatant oversight to discuss cable branding strategies without addressing narrowcasting, which is arguably the foremost tactic utilized to define a cable network's brand identity. Narrowcasting functions as both a programming and branding strategy and refers to the attempt by cable networks to appeal to a clearly defined, niche segment of the viewing audience. This is a dominant discourse in current scholarship, and one that I question the continued relevance of in the next chapter. From cable's early days, narrowcasting was an important branding strategy in establishing and distinguishing these networks. It started out as an effective way to secure distribution deals with cable operators, let viewers know what content they could expect from a channel, and communicate audience demographics to advertisers. Programming to a niche group, such as women or music fans, was an easy way for cable networks to distinguish their brand from the competition and to do so at limited expense in an age when original programming was largely outside their budgets. Narrowcasting provided a way for the industry to profit from untapped markets that were ignored by the broadcast networks while creating a sense of community for audience members who had frequently been marginalized or ignored, such as BET's targeting of African Americans.

While the programming schedule helped to define the network's brand, "the designs of the channels themselves: Nick is for kids, Animal Planet is for pet owners, Food Network is for foodies, etc.," were what truly established a network's niche (Banet-Weiser, Chris & Freitas, 2007, p. 9). Programs were scheduled to alert viewers that the network understood their lifestyle and unique identity while also sending the message to advertisers that their network was the one place where this very specific demographic could be located. When there were few choices, it was enough to say you were the network for sports, animal lovers, music fans, etc. Cable executives believed that viewers gravitated towards networks that promised programming that was "just for them." But times have changed in the past decade. I interrogate changes to narrowcasting and conceptions regarding the longevity and expansiveness of the practice in the first phase (2000-2011) of the post-network era. Many scholars assume that narrowcasting plays a larger role today than in previous eras due to audience fragmentation, but in fact, post-network era economic and industrial shifts have necessitated that networks expand their audience base to remain financially viable – in so doing, narrowcasting is no longer as dominant a practice. This is one of many branding strategies of the post-network era I examine. Notably, branding was a key strategy used by cable networks throughout their history. Due to the role of Time Warner and its cable properties HBO and Turner Broadcasting as industry leaders, a contemporary case study of cable networks under this corporate umbrella will further our understanding of the continued use of branding in the post-network era.

1.1.4. The Evolution of Time Warner, Inc.

Time Warner is a global, multimedia corporation with a disproportionate percentage of holdings and revenue that derive from cable. Time-Warner is one of the largest media conglomerates in the world, earning $12 billion in gross profits for 2014, and revenues of $27.3 billion (Time Warner Annual Report). This project solely focuses on cable television, which in 2014 encompassed 58% of the company's total revenue at $15.8 billion, but Time-Warner's media holdings include film studios, book-publishing houses, and print publications as well. It is easy to see how significant a financial contribution Time Warner's cable networks are to the overall economic health of the conglomerate and how quickly they've become a major financial asset contributing to the overall health of the company. Time-Warner's extensive ownership of cable networks includes: TBS, TNT, CNN, Cartoon Network, truTV, Adult Swim, Boomerang, TCM, HLN, HBO, and Cinemax. It also shares ownership of the broadcast network, The CW, with CBS Corporation. In addition, from January 2001 to May 2009, the internet company America Online was part of the Time Warner conglomerate. According to the official Time Warner statement, the spin-off was a result of a company strategy to get out of internet delivery for a more intense focus on content. The decision to spin off Time Warner Cable, the multi-system cable operator, just three short months before the Time Warner-AOL separation announcement was due to the same logic. AOL's news release on its first day as an independent company boasted that the new venture allowed "New AOL [to] maximize core strengths in content, advertising, and communications to succeed in the new content economy" (AOL press release, Dec. 10, 2009).

I selected Time Warner not because it is representative of all media companies, but because it is a distinctive company that exemplifies the post-network era for several key reasons. First, Time Warner's gamble of merging with AOL illustrated the industry-wide confusion about internet media companies and, though poorly executed, reinforced the belief that the web would be the future of the media industry. Secondly, from 2001 to 2011, HBO repeatedly led the cable industry with innovations in programming through the financing and distribution of "quality" dramas *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008) as well as through technological advancements such as HBO Go. HBO has also made great strides in expanding into international markets. While I am focusing here on the American television system, it is important to note the global scope of the current television industry and the cultural and economic impact of that expansion. Increased globalization is one of the key reasons why branding became such an integral aspect of the television industry. It is economically beneficial for conglomerates to establish brands that can not only can move across different types of media but also across different cultures and geographical locations. However, for this particular study, I chose to focus primarily on cable television network brands as they function in America to narrow my framework. In addition, though the American and global television industries are interconnected, particular business strategies, such as branding, are a greater subject of emphasis in the structure and culture of the U.S. industry.

In January of 2001, the FCC approved the biggest merger in media history, combining AOL and Time Warner into one giant conglomerate. The timing of this deal led critics to read it as foreshadowing media mergers of the new millennium. Media coverage interpreted it at the time as indicative of the future shape of the media industry with *The New York Times* speculating that it was "the best evidence yet that old and new media are converging" (Hansell, 2000). One year later, the new company claimed $54 billion in goodwill – the largest writeoff in corporate history and a signal that things were not going as well as hoped. By early 2003, the SEC was investigating the company for hundreds of millions of dollars in fraud, and by the end of that year, the "AOL" was dropped and AOL Time Warner became simply Time Warner. Time Warner certainly paid the cost for the merger with a total fine of $510 million from the government and $3 billion spent settling lawsuits with shareholders and employees.

One consideration of this dissertation is the impact of this failed merger on Time Warner's corporate culture and how the conglomerate's cable networks have used branding since 2001 to deal with changes in the cable's industry structure, economics, and cultural practices. The corporate branding and programming strategy immediately after the merger was "synergy," which influenced decisions. The failure of this strategy likely also plays a role in the autonomy given to Time Warner's television networks – HBO and Turner Broadcasting are run in many ways as singular entities. One example of this separation can be seen in HBO's 2015 launch of a standalone television service, HBO Now, which industry expert David Bank speculated could impact Turner if a result of the over-the-top service is the dismantling of the traditional cable bundles. I discuss this move by HBO in the final chapter and the role that branding plays.

Aside from the overhyped, failed merger, Time Warner has many other distinct attributes that make it stand out as an interesting case study of established cable network players grappling with a changing industry and uncertain future. The autonomy with which Turner Broadcasting and HBO operate is important to take into consideration, as is the location of Turner in Atlanta rather than New York or Los Angeles, where most other cable networks are headquartered. This location brings with it the slower culture of the South along with the geographic removal from the larger media industry. The size of Time Warner compared to other media conglomerates also makes it stand out. In 2015, it has been streamlined into primarily a video content company and is much less horizontally integrated than other conglomerates, such as Comcast-NBC Universal or Disney. A case study of Comcast-NBC Universal would have to include an examination of Comcast and the industrial implications of a cable operator owning television networks. Similarly, an analysis of The Walt Disney Company would necessitate a look at Hollywood movies since for the first sixty years of its operation, it was mainly known as a film studio. Such a study would also need to include a review of the impact of the Disney theme parks on corporate strategy and branding. In many ways, the long history of Disney gives it a much more prominent, consistent conglomerate brand as opposed to Time Warner so it would make for a different study in that way as well. Both Comcast-NBC Universal and Disney own broadcast networks, and while Time Warner owns a share of The CW, it does not own a broadcast network outright, which makes it largely a cable business. For these reasons and others that will be articulated throughout the dissertation, Time Warner provides an excellent opportunity to study the role of branding in the evolving cable television industry.

1.1.5. Time Warner, Inc.

Time Warner, Inc. began with an idea for Time magazine in 1918 by Yale classmates and friends Henry Luce and Briton Hadden, who worked on the Yale newspaper together and aspired to produce a magazine that would provide short summaries of news on a weekly basis. The magazine wasn't officially launched until March 3, 1923, and when Hadden died a few years later in 1929, Luce assumed control of the business. Time very quickly proved profitable, and Luce expanded his publishing empire, began trading on the New York Stock Exchange in 1964, and by 1967, its revenue reached $600 million. Ten years later, Time got into the cable business by purchasing American Television & Communication. Henry Luce died in 1967 and noted in his will that Time should focus on journalism and the public interest. This mission ultimately triggered the merger of Time and Warner Communications in 1989 when Paramount attempted a takeover of Time. Lawyers for Time, Inc. successfully used the will in court to argue they were obligated to act in the public interest, not in the interest of shareholder primacy, and therefore could merge with Warner rather than accept the Paramount buyout.

Concurrently with Time's launch in 1918, Harry, Sam, Abe and Jack Warner, or The Warner Brothers as they are more commonly known, opened their first film studio on *Sunset Boulevard*. By 1923, they incorporated their movie production company as the Warner Brothers Company. The company was the first to produce a feature film with sound, *The Jazz Singer*, in 1927, establishing its reputation as an industry leader and innovator with the successful use of this cutting-edge technology. In 1956, the company was sold to a syndicate owned by Serge Semenenko and Charles Allen, who immediately went into the business of television production with hit series *77 Sunset Strip* and *Maverick*. After a few sales and acquisitions, Steven J. Ross became the owner of Warner-Seven Arts and renamed the business Warner Communications, Inc. in 1972. When Time and Warner merged in 1989, Ross described it as "the synergy to end all synergies," which is interesting in light of the AOL merger a decade later that would be the ultimate industrial attempt and failure at corporate synergy (Compaine & Gomery, 2000).

1.1.6. HBO

While Time and Warner Brothers were each evolving separately, in the early 1960s, a man named Charles Dolan founded a cable television company in New York City called Sterling Communications in order to wire Manhattan for cable. In 1965, he ran out of money and sold twenty percent of the company to Time, Inc. (Munk, 2004). Two years later, Dolan had spent more than two million dollars and only wired thirty-four city blocks, giving him just four hundred cable customers. Time invested an additional $10 million on top of the $1.25 million they had already given to Sterling (Munk, 2004). Still struggling in 1971, Dolan came up with the idea to create a cable network exclusively available to Sterling subscribers that he called The Green Channel. In May 1972, he hired a lawyer named Gerald Levin to help him launch the newly dubbed Home Box Office. On November 8 of that year, HBO transmitted its first programming to subscribers in the small town of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania – a live hockey game in Madison Square Garden, followed by the film *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Dolan was quickly ousted and Levin was promoted to president in 1973 because "he was the only one who understood [HBO]" (Munk, 2004, p. 14). But the network struggled to attract subscribers. In 1975, Levin persuaded Time, Inc. to spend $7.5 million on space on a transponder on RCA's new Satcom satellite to distribute HBO nationally.

On September 30, HBO was the first television network ever broadcast via satellite, and its first program to air was a boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, "The Thrilla in Manila." It was an exclusive offering because the other networks would have to wait to physically transfer the film of the fight back to America before they could show it to their audiences. HBO literally offered its subscribers something they couldn't get anywhere else, which became the cornerstone of their quintessential brand identity, a point I elucidate in chapter three. By the end of that year, HBO had 287,000 subscribers, and in 1976, *Channels* magazine, a major trade publication at the time, crowned Gerald Levin "the man who started a revolution" (Edgerton & Jones, 2008). By 1980, one in every ten television households subscribed to HBO, and two years later, HBO had 12 million subscribers, annual revenues of $500 million, and generated 24% of Time, Inc.'s total profits (Holt, 2011).

In 1989, new chief executive officer, Michael Fuchs, launched the network's "first ever national image advertising campaign, Simply the Best" building upon its industry leader status (Edgerton & Jones, 2008, p. 10). HBO was the first channel to offer "multiplexing" to subscribers in 1994 – a term that refers to the expansion of its service by offering multiple channels. The now infamous, "It's Not TV, It's HBO," campaign was created in 1996 with a budget of $25 million per year for the rollout of game-changing original series *Oz* (1997-2003), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), which were developed with an original production budget of $500 million (Edgerton & Jones, 2008). By 1998, HBO's multiplex had five total channels, and in 2001, the network was the first to offer video-on-demand services. Almost four decades after its initial launch, HBO created "a new content model" with release of the HBO Go mobile viewing application on May 2, 2011 (via HBO press release dated March 2, 2011).

1.1.7. Turner Broadcasting

Another cable industry innovator whose tale intersects with the history of Time Warner is Ted Turner. His career began on March 5, 1963 when he inherited a billboard business in Georgia. In 1968, Turner bought WJRJ and renamed it first as WTCG (Turner Communications Group), then to WTBS in 1976 (Holt, 2011). Impressed by Gerald Levin's use of Satcom to broadcast HBO, he flew to New York to meet with Levin to learn about the process of satellite broadcasting. He followed Levin's advice and broadcast WTBS via satellite in 1976 as cable's first superstation and the second to transmit via satellite. Also that year, he purchased the Major League Baseball team, the Atlanta Braves, to boost his station's programming offerings, and the Atlanta basketball team The Hawks for the same reason in 1977. In 1980, he stunned the television industry by launching the first 24-hour news network, CNN, which many felt would be unsuccessful. Using junk bonds, Turner bought film company MGM/UA in 1985 to use as a media library for his cable networks, which Jennifer Holt (2011) argued "…essentially filled 60 percent of Turner's programming needs" (p. 81).

The purchase left Turner heavily in debt so he sold back the MGM/UA film studios to a group of cable operators in exchange for 37% of Turner Broadcasting. However, he kept the library to launch TNT (Turner Network Television) in 1988. Turner officially merged with Time Warner in 1996, which created the largest entertainment, information, and media company in the world at the time – a major occasion marking their status as leaders of the media industry. Ted Turner received ten percent of Time Warner in the deal, making him the largest single shareholder. Shortly after the merger with AOL in 2001, Turner was edged out of the new executive order. Always one to hold a grudge, Turner was the loudest of Levin's critics, even notoriously slamming his fist down during a board meeting in November 2001, accusing him of "incompetence and negligence" (Munk, 2004, p. 250). After the failures of both Levin and AOL, he largely stepped away from the media industry when he resigned in 2003. Throughout much of Turner Broadcasting's history, Ted Turner had become synonymous with the network group, but in the demise of the AOL Time Warner merger and his ouster, networks like TBS and TNT had to establish their own unique brand identities. After many changes throughout their history, this study of TBS, TNT and HBO's use of branding examines how they struggle to manage their industrial dominance as the post-network era evolves. Theories and scholarship from major academic fields inform this examination.

1.2. Interventions in the Field

Theoretical and methodological elements from three overlapping, but certainly not distinct, fields influence this dissertation project: cultural studies, media industry studies, and production studies. My theoretical approach to television acknowledges it is simultaneously an object made up of industrial, economic, cultural, and historical processes as well as complex interrelationships between media workers, audiences, and texts. I draw from cultural studies theories to understand the power dynamics at work in constructing and maintaining brand identities as well as the importance of situating the context before analyzing any media object. The emphasis that media industry studies places on the overlapping mechanisms of structural roles, industry goals and policies, production practices, and the financial interest of conglomerates on media frames the analysis for this project. Finally, production studies examines the performance of corporate identity through media texts and rituals, which I apply to my interrogation of the TBS, TNT, HBO, and network web application brands.

By examining culture and cultural artifacts, such as the culture of producing brands or the brands themselves, it is possible to understand power dynamics and economic and social relationships (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, and Mackay, 1997). For this reason, cultural studies theorists, such as Stuart Hall (1980) and Julie D'Acci (1994), study the media as a way to interrogate the social, political, and economic factors that work to establish, maintain, and challenge power relations in society. Another main component in cultural studies analysis is the importance of context. One cannot examine the part outside of the whole, and it is impossible to investigate a media text or industry trend without taking into consideration the social, economic, political, and historic context it developed and operates within (Grossberg, 1997; Hammer and Kellner, 2009). More recently, Julie D'Acci (2004) proposed a revised model of the Open University's Circuit of Culture Model that she argued specifically addressed cultural studies scholars conducting television studies research (du Gay, Hall, James, Mackay & Negus, 1997). This model, which she calls the "Circuit of Media Study," highlights four processes rather than the five in the open model: production, cultural artifact, reception, and sociohistorical context. The primary aim of D'Acci's (2004) model is to describe and map possible ways for how critical researchers analyze the media along with encouraging the study of economic imperatives at every site on the circuit. I agree with D'Acci's (2004) theorization and particularly the emphasis she places on the constant drive for profits, but I primarily focus my analysis on the production process and the sociohistorical context.

For these reasons, I utilize D'Acci's (2004) circuit of media study as a guide for my analysis of Time Warner's post-network era branding strategies. For the production process, I interviewed cable branding and programming executives to understand their strategies, practices, and institutional priorities. The cultural text I examine is the network brand for each cable network I analyze: TBS, TNT, and HBO. D'Acci (2004) does not perceive a formal reception study as necessary in her model; though I do not fully examine reception either, I look at the various new media technologies available in the market and use secondary audience research, including industry data such as that conducted by Nielsen as well as scholarly studies, to understand viewing behavior in the post-network era. Finally, I consider the sociohistorical context in the evolving post-network era, including widespread industry trends, institutional shifts such as the merger and subsequent devolution of the relationship between AOL and Time Warner, the strategies and tactics employed by workers at competing broadcast and cable networks, and the challenges posed by the post-network media environment for the cable television industry, in particular as they pertain to TBS, TNT, and HBO.

The second field this project aims to connect with is media industry studies, a relatively newly articulated field of study to academia, though such work has been undertaken before such a label existed. The emphasis that media industry studies places on the overlapping mechanisms of structural roles, industry goals and policies, production practices, and the financial interest of conglomerates on media frames the analysis for this project. Holt and Perren (2009) argue media industry studies developed in response to the rapidly changing media environment of the post-network era. Media industry studies scholars acknowledge that media workers negotiate structural roles, corporate policies, industrial strategies, and production practices with the goal of satisfying the financial interests of conglomerates. Media industry studies also draws heavily from production studies and cultural studies, which is one reason that much overlap exists between the three.

My study of the particular divisions, agents, and strategies operating within Time Warner, Inc. fits well within these parameters yet addresses a new area of research in my focus on branding.   I examine how ideas about texts, audiences, and the cable television industry at large have formed, changed, and influenced Time Warner's promotional strategies and practices.

In keeping with the scholarship I draw from, I recognize and examine the sociohistorical context at all sites of my analysis and look at the cultural, economic, and social dimensions at work. Media industry studies scholars argue for a holistic investigation of all the parts that contribute to the media industries (Holt and Perren, 2009; Havens, Lotz and Tinic, 2009). This echoes the circuit of media study's claim that researchers must consider all the interrelationships between the various sites. Looking at just the media text or just production practices is not enough. I also used methods common in media industry studies such as close readings of discourses in trade publications and interviews with cultural workers. These techniques are also used in production studies, a framework within media industry studies that further informs this project.

Production studies, simply defined, involves "research about people who make television programs [or films] and how these people work" (Davies, 2006, p. 21). I adopted a particular type of production study in this dissertation, outlined by John Caldwell (2006a; 2006b; 2008) that focuses on the culture of media production, the performance of corporate identity, and a look at "critical industrial practices." Critical industrial practices, according to Caldwell (2006a), include "the contemporary industry's 'deep' texts, rituals, and spaces," such as promotional campaigns, trade publications, logos and branding material, professional events and conventions, upfront meetings, and everyday workplace practices. All of these items are examined in this project. Cable television networks, such as TBS, TNT, and HBO, utilize and orchestrate those rituals and texts in a coordinated effort to communicate a clear brand identity to audiences, advertisers, cable service providers as well as to their network competitors. This performed identity is worth examination so we can better understand how cultural workers' perceptions and industrial processes create and maintain media brands. In the next section, I engage with literature on branding to contextualize and map out my arguments and ideas on how cable television network branding and promotion operate in the post-network era.

1.3. Literature Review

This dissertation engages with branding literature from various disciplines and objects of analysis. In this section, I discuss the literature that provides the theoretical and methodological foundation for my study and address key gaps with my research. As noted above, media studies scholar Catherine Johnson's (2011) work is the primary basis on which I build my study because she has done the most extensive work to date on television branding. As a foundation of this study, I apply her arguments that television branding helps us chart how the television industry has evolved and allows us to investigate the dynamics between the conglomerate brand, the network brand, and the program brand (pp. 178-179). She published the most extensive study so far of television branding and the most useful. She examines branding practices and argues there are three categories for television brands – the conglomerate brand, network brand, and program brand – that overlap and work together. Johnson primarily relies on case studies to examine how branding functions in the contemporary U.S. and U.K. television industries, though she does not specifically address the post-network era's unique challenges. She draws primarily from Adam Arvidsson (2006) and Celia Lury (2004), who do not focus on branding within the television industry, but instead, consider retail brands like Nike and how Starbucks stores represents the brand.

Arvidsson (2006) primarily argues that "brands only gain meaning and value through what people do with and say about them" (p. 168). In his view, the power of brands is in the experience they provide consumers with their ability to communicate emotions, lifestyles, and personal identities. Major examples of this that Arvidsson (2006) offers include branded environments like Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, which establish hierarchical communities and produce realities that are governed by the brands, or the ways that dating sites constrain users and force them to conform to certain pre-determined identities, which, in turn, reinforce the site's brand. Lury (2004) uses this theory to study how consumers make meaning from branding, but I apply it to media workers, such as those who work for Turner Broadcasting and HBO, who create brands to communicate certain ideas and corporate identities. Like Arvidsson (2006), Lury (2004) also explores how customers make meaning from brands in her analysis of how brands, particularly logos such as the Apple Macintosh or the Nike Swoosh, function as interfaces to connect consumers, producers, and workers. Lury's concentration is not just on how consumers use brands, but also on the dominant role that branding plays in the production and distribution of products and services – a dynamic I pay special attention to in my analysis. Using these theories as a framework, my research relies on interviews with television executives and analyses of their public statements and marketing campaigns to better understand the branding process, including practices, strategies, and motivations behind its use.

Key gaps in the research that this dissertation addresses include the industrial process of designing and planning brands, the shared meanings between workers, consumers and parent companies, and the increasingly complex ways that television branding works. These issues have not been examined in part because until recently, much research on branding came out of business schools and focuses on measuring retail brand equity and conducting brand exploratory studies that are more administrative than critical. Examples of this type of study include work by Kevin Lane Keller (1998), who conducted a brand personality survey, and David Aaker (1996), whose work develops a new model of criteria for brand equity. Meanwhile, media economics scholars, such as Philip Napoli (2003; 2010), and cultural industries experts, such as Joseph

Turow (1998; 2008), are beginning to examine the social, cultural, and political ramifications of the rise in targeting and branding. However, their focus is on the advertising and marketing industries, paying special attention to addressable advertising, new methods of data collecting, regulatory and cultural concerns regarding viewers' privacy, and increasing audience fragmentation.

Research by business and marketing scholars take three main approaches to understanding the branding of retail goods and products: packaging, corporate branding, and lifestyle branding. Aspects of each are evident in television branding, yet function for different purposes and alongside different tools. An analysis of retailers' use of the tactics would focus on the distinct goals and structures of that industry. Much comparison can be made, however, and certainly the strategies of television branding originated in the early marketing of retail goods. Most scholars (Klein, 1999; Grainge, 2007; Moor, 2007) place the rise of branding in the late 19th century, "the machine age," when machines made the mass production and distribution of goods possible. Because goods were being mass-produced, logos and brands were necessary to differentiate products from competitors. Packaging is still an important component in the manufacturing and marketing of retail goods today, and scholars examine its power to influence consumers' purchasing decisions (Underwood, 2003; Mendez, Oubina and Rubio, 2011). While a network logo may seem comparable to product packaging in its ability to represent the network brand, it ultimately does not affect viewing choices. Program content, scheduling, network loyalty, and promotion have a greater influence on how viewers select programs to watch (Ruggiero, 2000).

Arvidsson (2006) argues that corporate branding began in the early 20th century as well when large-scale manufacturers hired public relations firms to help them combat negative publicity. In the 1980s, corporate branding took off in a new direction with the rise of globalization and became a necessity for any corporation wanting to establish a presence overseas (Klein, 1999; Arvidsson, 2006; Moor, 2007). Arvidsson (2006) sees the current iteration of the corporate brand as "mak[ing] the employees produce the identity of the organization" and argues that a corporate brand is as much about promoting a good image of the company to employees as it is to promoting it to the public (p. 85). The interviews that I conducted for this project gave me insight into the corporate brand as employees frequently spoke using the same buzzwords and phrases that showed up in network promotional campaigns. Research in this arena mostly comes from business schools and primarily focuses on best practices (Knox and Bickerson, 2003; Hankinson, 2007).

A third way that retail branding can be understood is by examining marketers' attempts to associate a product with a sense of community and personal identity. This became common after World War II when popular brands became symbols of what it is to be American and after the rise of television, which had a tremendous impact on economics and culture (Moor, 2007). To appease advertisers who wanted to target specific consumers, television networks segmented audiences into groups based upon demographic characteristics. This developed into "lifestyle advertising" as marketers began to associate personality traits with products to motivate consumers to make a purchase. The trend persists in the 21st century with a continued reliance on lifestyle advertising's focus on promoting emotions and a personal image for brands rather than product-centered attributes (Arvidsson, 2006; Moor, 2007).

Critics of lifestyle branding, such as Holt (2002; 2003), Blumenthal (2005), and Tadajewski (2010), argue from Marxist perspectives that it devalues individuality, turns people into products, manipulates consumers, and confines individuals to cultural positions that support consumerism and capitalism. The corporations that design, manufacture, and market products to consumers are wealthy entities with a great deal of political and cultural power. Marxist theorists assert that such power is used to exploit and profit off of consumers and view branding as a tool with which to accomplish that purpose (Holt, 2002; Holt, 2003; Wayne, 2003; Blumenthal, 2005; Tadajewski, 2010). In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein (2000) takes this stance and accuses corporations of prioritizing branding over manufacturing and using their power to exploit consumers and workers. Klein (2000) and others, such as Clark (1998), also argue that in efforts to maximize control and profits, brands limit the number of choices available to consumers. For example, when television networks select programs to air, there are only a finite number they can put on their schedule so they choose series that appeal to the type of audiences most attractive to advertisers. Such decisions are a result of industrial need rather than consumer demand, and consequently, many segments of the wider population are excluded leaving their tastes, values, and experiences unrepresented. Certainly, this is a key factor in constructing and maintaining network brand identities as TBS and TNT position themselves to appeal to tech-savvy young viewers that the advertisers wish to target. Although they do not rely on advertising, premium networks like HBO use branding and programming to attract affluent viewers who can afford to pay for the service. Napoli (2001) and Turow (2008, and 2010) discuss how advertising's prioritization of certain consumers over others replicates hierarchies within society and operates on a system that depends upon audiences as the primary product being sold.

Although there is great value in such criticism, consumers are not simply passive dupes who believe and adhere to whatever images and ideas are presented by mass media, but instead act as free agents who question marketing and media messages (de Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989).

While I acknowledge the social and cultural issues that branding can put forward, my theories about branding fall more in line with this stance. Furthermore, I cannot claim knowledge of the effects of branding on consumers without speaking directly with members of the cable TV viewing audience. In this particular project, I focus on evaluating TBS, TNT, and HBO's work in these areas and extrapolating meaning about how branding operates in an economic and industrial sense. Though this approach has its limitations due to the lack of engagement with the audience, I critically analyze branding messages and pay careful attention to issues of corporate power and audience segmentation. I draw from these approaches in my understanding of branding as a process that operates at the micro-level, manages the relationship between consumers and producers, and functions as an interface between employees and the companies they work for as well as between a television network's audience and its programming.

Now that I have discussed general branding history and research, I will shift to focus on theories of media branding and the different ways these theories pertain to my perspective and theories, such as my analysis of HBO's merchandising strategy. The scholarship mentioned above is important in understanding how branding works in a general sense, but only Johnson (2011) offers a detailed analysis of how branding operates across the television industry. However, similar ideas and theories do surface in other types of scholarship on media branding and promotion. For instance, Thomas Austin's (2002) account of film marketing asserts that publicity is as much about the particular media product as it is about the larger media conglomerate, which is related to Johnson's (2011) claims that television programs communicate the network brand. Austin's research on promotional campaigns for films in the 1990s demonstrates his understanding of a brand as an image or identity created by strategic marketing and promotion with the purpose of attracting audiences. Much of his analysis centers on what he terms "the dispersible text" – a text package designed to achieve commercial, cultural, and social reach by facilitating and benefiting from promotional processes. This concept views the film, or media product, as both a symbolic form and a commodity – very similar to the dichotomy of branding offered by Lury (2004). Austin's research draws from political economy, yet his approach to studying audience reception doesn't take up the position that marketing and/or media have negative effects on consumers. I will address this argument against the negative consequences of branding in a later section on branding criticism. I draw from Austin's examination of industry structure, practices, and goals in the way that I analyze how corporate culture, practices, and structures shape media brands.

Many cultural studies scholars, such as Lynn Spigel (1992) and Ellen Seiter (1995), investigate the cultural role that branding and promotion play and how brands work to associate consumer products within everyday life. Spigel's (1992) study of television's introduction into the home, though never expressly using the term "branding," analyzes how women's magazine articles and advertisements taught readers how to incorporate the new medium into daily routines. While her project is less about branding than it is about promotion, I share Spigel's (1992) cultural studies approach and methodology, as well as her ideas about how advertising functions within a larger context. Seiter (1995) looks at children's television programs, the commercials and print ads that targeted kids, and popular toys in terms of cultural representation. Seiter (1995) conflates branding with advertising, and discusses brands in relation to particular products and the image/identity they create and support in promotions. Both Seiter (1995) and Spigel's (1992) approaches are important in shifting focus from consumerism and capitalism and instead seeking to understand how media and product consumption work socially and culturally. In this way, they are in line with my own approach.

As I've mentioned, there is limited work that looks at branding specifically in relation to cable television networks. One of the few to do so is *Pimpin' Ain't Easy: Selling Black Entertainment Television* (2007) by Beretta Smith-Shomade. In it, Smith-Shomade combines television studies with African American studies and analyzes the BET network's role in creating representations of African Americans. She argues that capitalism is racist and that BET may serve as an example of black success within the capitalist system, but in so doing, it has failed the African American community. Similar arguments are made by Kristal Brent Zook about the Fox broadcast network and its initial appeal via programming and promotions to the black community. These kinds of critical interrogations of the motives of television industry executives as they participate in the brand-making process are rare and valuable case studies. In particular, Smith-Shomade's look at the power of the media conglomerate to produce popular culture that can negatively or positively impact racial dynamics within society adds to our conceptualization of how expanding conglomeration affects both the television industry and broader American culture.

Several studies look specifically at HBO in terms of branding and promotion, but as previously stated, most of these studies focus on particular HBO programs. Much of the research on the HBO brand centers on its slogan, "It's Not TV, It's HBO," and how that message aims to set the network apart from competitors because it alleges the network provides "quality" programming that others do not (Jaramillo, 2002; Nelson, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Smith, 2011b). These analyses simplify the HBO brand to this designation of featuring critically acclaimed programs and are useful to examine within the context of the discourse on quality television. While this slogan and the network's roster of original productions are examples of branding strategies employed by HBO, I argue that they are limited in scope and do not address the complex economic, structural, cultural, and industrial factors at work in the operations of HBO. A comprehensive analysis that considers all of the pay cable network's branding strategies and influences can create a fuller understanding of premium channel branding. Johnson (2011) argues that premium channels such as HBO are best positioned to utilize branding because the lack of advertisers means they have a more direct line to their viewers. There is no need for HBO to please advertisers by attracting viewers with certain desirable demographic characteristics. Instead, the network is able to focus solely on keeping its audience happy. Furthermore, unlike other networks which may be part of a bundled package from a cable provider, subscribers select HBO and pay a monthly fee for unmediated access to its programming and services. Branding functions best when there is the opportunity to form a direct relationship with viewers through direct engagement and interactivity. This is cultivated through the integration of advertising, marketing, and public relations – fields which all contribute to the creation and maintenance of brands in various ways, which I incorporate into my project.

One of the more important contributions to this dissertation project comes from Catherine Johnson's article on two of HBO's programs in her article, "Telebranding in TVIII: The network as brand and the program as brand" (2007). Johnson argues that the "program as brand" is more important because the network brand is increasingly disconnected from its programs in "TVIII," the age I refer to as the post-network era. I see the network brand as more significant than she does because of its broader reach and larger economic implications. However, I agree with her assertion that branding is an important area for academic research because of three key developments in the post-network era: the rise of major media conglomerates, an increase in viewer agency and control over television consumption, and expansion of options for television viewing, such as mobile and online platforms (p. 6). As noted previously, Johnson's theorization on branding significantly informs my research; however, her focus is primarily on British television whereas I concentrate on the U.S. television industry. In addition, my project centers on one media conglomerate and the branding strategies across its holdings, while Johnson's case study of HBO centers on her analysis of two individual programs, *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), instead of the entire network. I argue this is a critical difference because conducting a detailed investigation of specific branding practices as they operate within one media company narrows my argument and allows my theories to be focused and more expansive. Looking at the practices employed across multiple divisions of one company enables productive comparisons in terms of business models, economic and corporate strategies, and variations in programming that can facilitate more detail and elucidate nuance leading to greater understanding of the television industry more generally.

Fan studies scholar Barbara Selznick's (2009) case study of the Syfy network's rebranding is one of the few analyses of a single network's branding strategies. Using trade publications and network promotional materials, she examines how and why the network made the decision to rebrand and focuses on viewer reactions to the change. Selznick (2009) accurately states that Syfy's recent rebranding campaign came from a desire to "creat[e] a broader brand image, without alienating its generally desirable core audience," yet she is critical of the strategy (Selznick, 2009, p. 184). She cites the prevalence on internet message boards of "true" science fiction fans' negative reaction to the change and places much of her emphasis on the importance of a niche community of loyal fans to the future of the television industry. This is similar to Jenkins (2006; 2008) work about the increasing role that fans play in the film and television industries in terms of their desire to consume and re-consume all content related to a particular media text. Ross (2008) sees fans as so important to the television industry that their online feedback influences the content produced yet she ignores the role that advertisers play in this process. I analyze how audiences are understood and constructed by the industry yet do not delve into how viewers make sense of the media texts they consume so this project is less influenced by the approach fan studies scholars, such as Selznick (2009), Jenkins (2006; 2008), and Gray (2007; 2010), take on television branding.

Rather than arguing for the industrial value of fans, Jonathan Gray's (2007) work on fandom treats television as a cultural signifier and "identity marker" (p. 46). Gray's focus, however, is primarily on television programs and the relationships viewers form with those brand identities, rather than on networks or conglomerates as brands. His perspective has value in revealing how viewers form relationships with television programs, and his 2010 book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts* continues this approach with his evaluation of the impact of promotional campaigns in terms of audience interactions and engagement with texts and paratexts, such as promos and DVD extras. In fact, he asserts that these paratexts have meaning-making properties just as the primary text does, and in the case of non-viewers, they may be all that consumers know about a film or television series. Though Seiter (1995) did not use the term, her analysis of the ads and toys related to children's television was a study of paratexts as well. This is also similar to Paul Grainge's (2007) focus on how media conglomeration led to an era of "total entertainment" – a state of perpetual marketing, moving media across platforms and around the globe. Where Gray (2010) focuses on the ability of promos, DVD extras, and spoilers to brand a media text, Grainge (2007) looks instead at the branding work done by merchandising and media franchises. Gray's (2010) also examines franchises, but his approach is to focus on franchises in relationship to fan communities while

Grainge (2007) discusses the economic benefits of franchises to media conglomerates. While franchises do not factor into my analysis, in chapter three, I look at how merchandising is an important component of HBO's financial strategy as well as examine HBO promos and how they work to define the network brand.

Selznick (2009) and Jenkins (2006; 2008) are correct in their assertion that loyal viewers are key to brand equity and that their activity of moving across platforms to consume cult texts can be profitable, yet I believe that the scholars overvalue fans as a desirable and economically significant group to the contemporary industry, and I contend that their elevation of fans' worth to media companies is not entirely accurate. One assumption of such scholarship that I challenge is that I still see attracting a mass audience as being the primary goal of cable television networks, and as a result, niche fan communities are less valuable because they cannot bring in the ratings or advertising revenue of a large group of viewers. Networks have been making efforts to use broad, flexible brands, like TNT's drama brand, to appeal to a wider segment of the television viewing population. This is a direct divergence from trends like narrowcasting that characterized early cable television networks' use of branding. Research on such theories as narrowcasting and other branding practices influences my own stake in the debate.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This dissertation integrates literature on branding from different perspectives to carve out my theoretical perspective. Catherine Johnson (2011) heavily influences my work with her claim that an analysis of television branding is a unique lens to illuminate specificities of the television industry in the post-network era. Her focus along with my own concentrate on industrial practices and strategies, but Arvidsson's (2006) work, which draws from Marxist theory, examines how brands are used to communicate identities including socio-economic status to consumers. I use his theorization to examine how the Turner and HBO brands communicate television network identities and culture. In addition to Arvidsson (2006), Lury (2004) also looks at how consumers use and interpret brands, but she incorporates production processes into her theory. She studies how brands illustrate production and consumption along with the interactive relationships between the two. Similarly, my study focuses on the production of network brands and how executives manipulate branding and programming to influence audience behavior.

This dissertation looks at how networks use branding in the post-network era. As Mullen (2003) and Turow (1997) discuss in their histories on the strategies used in the multichannel era, branding became a key facet of the television industry when cable networks emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, a strong brand bolstered a network's connection with viewers and communicated relevance to providers and advertisers. However, network brands are more forcefully asserted in the post-network era, and executives depend heavily on them to justify programming decisions and secure marketing partnerships. As I examine approaches to branding from 2001 to 2011, I rely heavily on Lotz's (2007) identification of the post-network era as a time in the television industry's history defined by challenges, such as increased audience fragmentation, and threats to the status quo, such as competition from non-linear television services. Due the particular technological, industrial, and cultural changes investigated by Lotz (2007), branding is more important to the television industry than ever before as networks use it to manage and respond to post-network era conditions. My analysis of branding strategies used by TBS, TNT, and HBO further explores how and why the industry changed in the ways it has and will enhance our understanding of how the post-network era will continue to unfold.

Ross (2008) and Jenkins (2006; 2008) take note of the effects of new media technologies on the post-network era television industry, but do not consider the role of branding at any length. The lack of media industries studies research on branding and the television industry indicates that few recognize the significance and impact of the relationship between the two. A case study of the use of branding by Time Warner properties suggests that media industry scholars need to rethink the role that branding plays within that industry: it plays a central rather than secondary role and is more about communication via discourse to industry competitors and major players rather than to audiences. Key media industry scholars such as Amanda Lotz (2007), Henry Jenkins (2006; 2008), and Barbara Selznick (2009) have posited that television programming and branding are becoming more niche. The research presented in this dissertation suggests the opposite trend, particularly in the cable industry. In both basic cable networks, like TBS and TNT, and premium cable networks, such as HBO, branding and programming work together to broaden the audience and as a means to increase revenue from subscribers and/or advertisers. In particular, Selznick (2009), Jenkins (2006; 2008), and Gray (2007; 2010) overvalue fans' importance to the television industry and instead see cable networks targeting large audiences over niche audiences in their branding and programming efforts.

In the research that does examine branding in the media industry, scholars consider several aspects of branding. For my analysis of the power of branding and marketing campaigns by TBS, TNT, and HBO to convey meaning, I draw from Spigel's (1992) work on advertising and Gray's (2010) work on paratexts. Gray's (2010) interpretation of the industrial and cultural value of merchandise informs my study of HBO's merchandising efforts to further their brand and increase ancillary revenue. In her investigation of new ways of consuming television and the interactive possibilities afforded by new media technologies, Ross (2008) did not consider how the economic and industrial structures of different types of television networks impact their approach to non-linear television. I adapt some of her work on this, such as her observations of fans' online behavior, when I look at the TV Everywhere model as it is used in distinct ways by Turner networks versus HBO. Throughout this study, I integrate literature on branding, television studies and the media industry studies to interrogate how TBS, TNT, and HBO use branding strategies and to examine the particularities of the unfolding post-network era.

1.5. Research Questions

In this dissertation, I analyze how and why cable television networks use branding in particular ways and ask what branding can tell us about the post-network era. I consider how industrial, economic, and cultural forces, such as the role of cable operators and they ways networks make programming decisions, have changed from the multichannel era as well as consider how networks use branding to remain relevant. Because branding is a more powerful part of cable network strategies and philosophies in the post-network era, a study of it can reveal the tensions and pressures cable networks face as they attempt to maintain their industrial dominance in a shifting and uncertain television industry. In the next section, I outline how I apply observation and narrative analysis as methods to explore these questions.

1.6. Methods Section

Caldwell's (2006b) recommended methods for undertaking cultural studies of production involve combining ethnography and textual analysis of texts other than the primary media text such as promotional materials. The primary techniques used in this dissertation project include observation at industry trade events and narrative analysis of trade publications and interviews with television executives while also relying on historiographic methods to explain the development of cable network branding in the post-network era. As media workers performing a brand identity are susceptible to reinforcing the company line at all times, a multi-method approach is necessary to truly investigate the strategies, behaviors, and structures at work in the production of culture. As social actors operating within a distinct structure and culture, individuals frame their ideas in particular ways to reinforce and reflect that culture's values. If the way that media workers talk about branding reflects the values of their network and/or industry culture, it is important to analyze that speech and the messages created by those workers to illuminate the culture of media production, and in the case of this project, the culture of cable network branding.

In Caldwell's (2006b) "Cultural Studies of Media Production: Critical Industrial Practices," he demonstrates how researchers can use textual analysis to decode narratives from media industry executives. Narrative analysis is accomplished by determining the image or industrial value the executive is attempting to put forth and analyzing it against the realities of industrial constraints. For example, in a one-on-one interview when a producer says, "I only produce projects I care about," Caldwell argues he/she is presenting him/herself as someone with integrity who doesn't care about financial imperatives. However, a deep textual analysis and understanding of media industry narratives, rituals and performativity reveals that, in fact, the industry is heavily concerned with profit margins and the "bottom line," as much as they may try to elide this fact and speak to greater creative objectives. One pattern I noticed in an interview that I conducted with HBO executives was the value each placed on HBO's lengthy history as an industry leader and innovator. For example, one executive compared the innovativeness of HBO Go to HBO being the first cable network to broadcast via satellite. The value in the "innovator narrative" is that HBO is an independent trailblazer, yet the fact is that HBO has always been part of a major media conglomerate and has reaped the benefits of that privileged position while other true start-up networks were unable to survive in the competitive capitalist marketplace.

I also drew from the methodologies of television historiography to conduct this contemporary history of cable branding and promotional strategies from the end of the multi-channel transition era through the first phase of the post-network era. By understanding these past developments, we can trace patterns as well as see the longevity of certain contemporary practices. Consistent with a cultural studies approach, William Boddy (1992) claims that we can deepen our understanding of these new technologies by looking at “the ways in which their prospect unsettles prevailing textual forms, business models and audience assumptions” (p. 3). This is precisely the aim of my project, and this study looks at established cable networks struggling as a mature industry confronting new interlopers in the face of internet content providers such as Hulu and Netflix. In this dissertation, I probe how recent developments and innovations such as new media technologies in the media industry altered existing strategies and structures, and I show that this analysis is both historically and industrially significant. As such, it can enhance our scholarly conceptualization of television as a medium especially in relation to other industry sectors and emerging media forms.

In following Caldwell’s (2006b) recommendations for a production study of critical industrial practices, I conducted research through an analysis of three trade publications (*Variety*, *Multichannel News*, and *Broadcasting and Cable*) and examined promotional materials such as press releases, interviews with television executives, and formal presentations and speeches from 2001 to 2011. I conducted six interviews with mid-level employees of Time Warner, Inc. primarily at TBS, TNT, and HBO along with other cable industry experts and transcribed the interviews for analysis. In addition, I interviewed two cable branding experts who are not associated with Time Warner. To conduct this research, I utilized the interview guide approach, which is a semi-structured interview format that begins with a list of questions, but allows for additional probing on the part of the interviewer to extract further detail from the informants. The advantage to this approach is that it is more systematic and comprehensive as it is planned in advance, yet still permits some deviation in order to produce richer data. In addition to these interviews, I attended and observed meetings and panel presentations at industry conferences such as the 2010 National Association for Television Programming Executives, The 2011Cable Show, which is the annual conference for the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, and the 2012 conference for the Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing for background material and to establish industrial context. I obtained approval from the Institutional Research Board at Georgia State University to conduct research on human subjects. These qualitative methods helped to generate a comprehensive understanding of trends in cable networks' approach to promotion and branding as industry insiders and experts understand it. Finally, I will provide an overview of my plan for the dissertation.

1.7. Chapter Outline

This dissertation uses case studies in chapters two through four to tackle distinct ways that specific divisions within Time Warner utilize branding and promotional strategies. The dissertation is thus structured by the differences between divisions and a consideration of the tensions in branding strategies as well as corporate cultures across one major media conglomerate. The first chapter focuses on TBS and TNT; the second chapter looks at HBO; and the third chapter analyzes television distributed via the internet. This introduction presented my take on previous research and theories related to branding and provided a summary of cable television's development to offer context to my analysis in later chapters. It also questioned the post-network era as it is currently conceptualized in addition to reworking prior assumptions about the role of branding in the cable television industry. This provides a foundation for my analysis and indicates how my research intersects and expands upon our understanding of this shift from one era into the next.

Chapter Two focuses on the rise and success of general entertainment networks TBS and TNT, which routinely have produced high ratings and yielded profits that are competitive with their broadcast counterparts. The networks launched new slogans during this time period – TNT embraced "TNT Knows Drama" in 2001, while TBS adopted "TBS: Very Funny" in 2004. The new association with either drama or comedy signaled an effort by the networks to establish clear brand identities that communicated what viewers could expect from their programming, yet such identities were designed not to alienate any segment of the audience by being too specialized or too niche. During the classic network era, there were only three television networks so there was little need for branding to differentiate between the channel's offerings. As cable television rose in prominence during the multi-channel transition era, branding became increasingly necessary for three main reasons: 1) to communicate to viewers what types of programming could be expected on a given network; 2) to convey to advertisers the demographic makeup of the network's audience; and 3) to assert the network's value to multiple system operators so carriage would be maintained. In this dissertation, my analysis begins in 2001, which is the last phase of the multi-channel transition era (which began in the mid-1980s), so I chronicle how this era has shifted into the post-network era where branding has become a defining characteristic. I do not extensively discuss branding throughout the history of TBS and TNT, but I rather provide a brief overview of the networks' branding and programming practices over time to offer a point of comparison for the changes I uncover emerging from 2001 to 2011.

A key argument I put forth in this chapter is a trend I identify as "widercasting," which upsets and challenges our previous understanding of this time.

TBS and TNT have used original cable series, such as *The Closer* (2005-2012) and *10 Items or Less* (2006-2009), to establish brands with mass appeal as a strategic shift away from the traditional narrowcasting model in favor of "widercasting." Widercasting is the process by which cable networks deviate from the narrowcasting strategy employed in the multi-channel era, and it marked their attempt to broaden programming in order to attract more of a general or "mass" audience. I believe "widercasting" expands on and complicates Lotz's (2007) theorization on the post-network era and advances our understanding of this historic moment. This intersection of branding and programming underscores the key role branding plays in the post-network era. I contend that this strategy has been crucial to TBS and TNT's current success and can play a key role in the future. I argue that this strategy represents a shift in select cable networks' priorities and a revitalized interest in securing a broader, more marketable brand necessitated by changing industrial circumstances. Due to media convergence and increased time shifting by viewers in the post-network era, it is no longer economically viable for cable networks to produce programming for small niche groups. TBS and TNT recognized this earlier than many of their competitors and thus provide the perfect case study to examine this strategic shift. While this trend is an industry-wide pattern, my analysis solely focuses on TBS and TNT rather than incorporating other general entertainment networks such as USA or FX. I focus on the advantages that cable networks have by using a broad brand, arguing that Turner's use of widercasting is evident through three key industrial strategies: 1) its progression into airing original programming; 2) expanding into late night; and 3) exploiting unique advertising opportunities.

The second chapter analyzes the increased emphasis on branding for premium cable channel, Home Box Office (HBO). Despite early dabbles in the 1980s with shows like *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998), the pay cable network began its aggressive move into original series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). A greater emphasis on original programming was an economic necessity at the end of the multi-channel transition because as more premium channels surfaced, there were fewer options for the acquisition of movie rights. Thus, networks like HBO had to find alternatives. Also faced with declining subscriptions, this led to an effort across premium channels to develop original series, mini-series, and films – to establish a brand identity and maintain audience interest and subscriptions. HBO's pursuit of quality television met this and other economic needs. I examine how executives strategically used the media to promote the network even at times when HBO clearly deviated from its established brand. I question the validity of HBO's "quality" label by analyzing such inconsistencies between its programming and brand identity. These divergences and experimentations in programming escalated during HBO's "Slump Period" in the mid-to-late 2000s, culminating in the series finale of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) in 2007. The success of HBO's quality dramas led to other cable networks imitating the formula, and this increased competition required HBO to adjust its approach to original series. I assert that HBO targeted a "coalition audiences," which is a strategy first theorized by Collins (1992), and as it shares similarities to widercasting so I take care to distinguish the two from one another. Although it was not particularly new to HBO, I posit that its pursuit of "coalition audiences" helped the network to earn ancillary revenue during a time of great upheaval in the traditional television models from three main sources: 1) DVDs, 2) merchandise, and 3) syndication efforts.

Finally, the third chapter looks at the evolution of the non-linear television, which networks begin to experiment with as a response to the growth in media interactivity and to the consumers who have flocked to the internet as new competitors, such as Netflix and Hulu, surfaced in the digital space and offered vast content libraries and alternative viewing options. In 2009, Turner Broadcasting launched TV Everywhere, which is an authenticated service that makes select television content available to cable subscribers. The same year, HBO launched HBO Go, which was a revamped version of its website offering subscribers access to HBO original programming and exclusive movies. Two years later, HBO introduced the HBO Go mobile application, which allowed subscribers to view hundreds of titles on tablets and other portable streaming devices. Network-hosted online and mobile content was promoted for providing added value to the traditional cable TV model. Such a move marked an attempt both to maintain and attract subscribers as well as combat cord-cutting. These platforms developed out of a need for networks to move subscribers across multiple points of interaction with the network brand. When audiences watch TBS, TNT, or HBO shows on sites like Netflix or on DVD, they are less intimately connected with the network brand. They are also less likely to subscribe to the channel when they can access its content in other ways. Cable executives understood that their industry's future depended at least in part upon viewers' relationship with the network brand, and the adoption of mobile and web viewing applications marked an attempt to establish that link in an increasingly uncertain post-network era world. This issue was most pronounced for Time Warner because it so heavily consisted of cable ventures relative to other conglomerates.

While Turner networks and HBO shared a common goal in reorienting themselves for the online media environment, the peculiarities of the networks' economic models necessitated differences in strategy. Each embraced the TV Everywhere authentication model, but they used it in unique ways to support their networks' distinct financial goals and priorities. In the chapter, then, I outline the key distinctions in how basic cable networks, like TBS and TNT, approached the non-linear TV model in ways unique from the tactics used by premium networks, like HBO. The shape that the merging of the internet and television will take is still unknown, and an analysis of this particular moment in media history can shed light on both the competing forces at work and the shared visions of what many argue is an inevitable integration.

In sum, this dissertation analyzes branding and promotional strategies employed by Time Warner's cable divisions during the first stage of the post-network era. In doing so, it fills existing gaps in the research on the use of branding in the television industry and the branding of cable networks. Building upon Johnson (2011), I argue that branding is an excellent lens for assessing the post-network era from 2001 to 2011 and a productive means of understanding changes in the television industry more generally during this period. I draw from cultural studies in my treatment of cable networks as cultural artifacts and use D'Acci's (2004) circuit of media model to focus my study on the influence of production and sociohistorical context. Branding is a process that takes places at both the micro-level and macro-level, and I have applied media industries studies theories to look at such meaning-making practices employed at cable networks. Finally, production studies research on how the performance of cultural identities informs corporate culture and media work through industrial texts and rituals serves as a centerpiece of my study. Work by branding scholars such as Lury (2004) and Arvidsson (2006) provides the theoretical foundation for my analysis of TBS, TNT, and HBO. Observation and narrative analysis are the primary methods I use to conduct a contemporary history of how cable television networks are branding and programming differently in response to changes in audience viewing behavior, the rise of new media technologies, and other evolving features of the first stage of post-network era. In the next chapter, I will investigate the branding strategies and tactics of TBS and TNT, including “widercasting.”

2 "WIDERCASTING" THROUGH THE POST-NETWORK ERA WITH TBS AND TNT

In January 2010, late night veteran Conan O'Brien left NBC's *Tonight Show* (1962-current) amid a widely publicized controversy. By April, he surprised industry insiders and signed a deal, not with a broadcast network competitor, but instead, with cable network TBS to host a late night talk show beginning in November of that year. In a televised interview with CBS's *60 Minutes* (1968-current) prior to the show's launch, O'Brien explained his decision to move from broadcast to cable: "I do not look down my nose at cable, and I think anyone who does isn't paying attention to television these days because…this world is changing very quickly" (May 2, 2010). While cable networks filled their schedules with more original programs each year, the last stronghold that broadcast had over cable in 2010 was news and late night. The press took notice of the growing similarities between broadcast and cable programming: at the time of his move, headlines boasted "The Future of Broadcast TV's Unsteady as Cable Strengthens," "Is Network TV's Model Lost?" and "Conan's Move to TBS Shows Cable TV's Strength," positioning this event as the signal of an important industrial shift (Arango & Carter, 2009; Guthrie, 2010; *Associated Press*, 2010). Yet rather than seeing Conan's move as an abrupt moment of change, instead it should be seen as the culmination of a decade-long process by which basic cable television took incremental steps to get closer to the broadcast model. Conan can be seen as producing just one example of this increasing shift from 2001 to 2011, which I call "widercasting." In choosing the term "widercasting," I am able to challenge dominant discourses circulated by scholars, such as Amanda Lotz (2007), about the growing nichification and narrowcasting of cable during the post-network era.

When cable networks first cropped up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they struggled for legitimacy in their attempts to acquire distribution and make deals with the largest programmers and operators, such as Comcast and Time Warner Cable. Narrowcasting to niche segments of the audience was a quick and easy way to differentiate one cable network from another and to let viewers know what types of programming to expect from a given distribution channel. According to Johnson (2011), having a niche also helped a network get carriage deals because operators wanted to provide subscribers with a wide variety of content. At that time, which is often labeled as the "multichannel era," branding was as sophisticated as describing the niche the network hoped to program to such as women (Lifetime) or music fans (MTV). By the 2000s, viewers had hundreds of channels to choose from as well as timeshifting options. Cable networks worked harder than ever to stand out among the competition. Game-changing shifts in viewer habits and demands, along with larger industrial developments, led cable networks to expand their brand identity and then broaden content to appeal to a larger segment of the audience. For general entertainment networks, such as TBS and TNT, which historically targeted a mainstream audience from their inception, the shift in branding strategies makes clear that the post-network era industrial context necessitated certain changes in structure and strategy that extend to programming as well. I argue that the use of branding from 2001 to 2011 is indicative of something more complex and distinctive in terms of business practices, economics, and programming for the cable industry at large. In the face of threats from increased timeshifting and the rise of new online platforms, cable networks have used branding as a way to adjust and adapt to a changing media landscape, and we can better understand how and why these shifts occur by focusing in on the branding processes at work. Prior scholarly accounts on the post-network era have not accounted for this industrial trend, and this case study analysis seeks to remedy that gap in existing research.

Based upon an analysis of trade publications (*Broadcasting & Cable, Multichannel News,* and *Variety*) and discourse at cable industry events (NATPE, CTAM, and The Cable Show), in this chapter, I use a case study of TBS and TNT to show how and why cable networks started to vie for a bigger piece of the pie and cast a wider net in terms of moving away from the traditionally accepted narrowcasting model – such a move I call "widercasting." While a case study by definition is an analysis of a unique, specific entity, I do see widercasting at work across the cable television industry more broadly, including with niche networks like Syfy and Lifetime. However, my focus is primarily to interrogate how TBS and TNT utilized it strategically and in ways particular to those networks[2]. Widercasting is the process by which cable networks deviated from the narrowcasting that divided audiences in the multichannel era and broadened programming in an attempt to attract more of a general "mass" audience. I believe "widercasting" both expands on and complicates Lotz's (2007) theorization on the post-network era and advances our understanding of this currently developing age. In other words, through a shift in the study of branding practices, we can understand wider historical and industrial transformations.

Amanda Lotz (2007) details the rise of a new era for television – the post-network era – which she identifies as beginning in the mid-2000s and sees as involving technological and behavioral changes in the industry. Traditionally, television has been conceptualized by its ability to reach a mass audience; Lotz (2007), however, asserts this is no longer true because in the post-network era, the U.S. television audience "is more accurately understood as a collection of niche audiences" (p. 5). She further identifies the emerging era – which is still evolving – by

[2] As I will elucidate throughout this chapter, I also view Turner's use of widercasting as evident of the Time Warner conglomerate brand especially in terms of innovation and leading the industry, and use it as a lens to better understand trends impacting the cable television industry as a whole.

a shift in the power dynamics between the audience and the industry, claiming that viewers have developed more power and agency due to the industrial value of niche segments. Lotz's work has become a dominant framework for how subsequent scholars understood and talked about television in the post-network era. However, other TV studies scholars, such as Parks (2004), Ross (2008) and Selznick (2009), have drawn from her ideas in a way that enforces the assumption that narrowcasting is more important than ever. As this chapter illustrates, we need to be more critical of such notions. In fact, these models are not economically feasible in the post-network era.

Widercasting challenges many widely circulated arguments by television studies scholars, such as Lisa Parks's (2004) theory of "flexible microcasting," which argues that the prevalent model of television is one of personalization that allows viewers to isolate themselves and consume content based on narrow, individual preferences, and interests. Widercasting also has implications for the value of fans asserted in work on convergence culture. For example, Sharon Ross's (2008) ideas about how networks encourage "tele-participation" to engage fans can by complicated by a more explicit engagement with industry discourse and understanding the limited value of fans to the network's bottom-line. In addition to these two examples, a third argument that widercasting challenges is one introduced by Barbara Selznick (2009) who uses Lotz's (2007) theories to argue that the greater importance of fans is a central component of the post-network era.

While acknowledging Syfy's decision to "creat[e] a broader brand image, without alienating its generally desirable core audience," Selznick (2009) is critical of the strategy (p. 184). She cites the prevalence on internet message boards of "true" science fiction fans' negative reactions to the change from SciFi to Syfy and places much of her emphasis on the importance of a niche community of loyal fans to the future of the television industry. Selznick is correct in her assertion that loyal viewers are key to brand equity and that their activity of moving across platforms to consume cult texts can be profitable. Yet I believe that Selznick overvalues fans as a desirable and economically significant group to the industry, and I contend that her elevation of fans' worth to media companies is not entirely accurate. A study of widercasting thus provides a challenge to this perspective. Other scholars, such as Henry Jenkins (2006; 2008), make similar assumptions. For example, in his 2008 book, *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins asserts that fans have a greater impact on programming decisions. He writes, "Fans are seeing more shows reflecting their tastes and interests reaching the air; those shows are being designed to maximize elements that appeal to fans…" (p. 62). Fan studies and the convergence culture literature often downplay or deny the fact that the media industry's economic imperatives have forced networks to seek broad, not narrow, audiences. Profits drive the industry, and when it comes to satisfying advertiser demands, the higher the ratings a network can provide, the better. The commonsense assumption that everyone has a voice in the post-network era and every segment of the population matters is simply false. Producing television programming to attract and engage fans is not a financially viable practice for the cable television industry– at least not as a lone or dominant strategy. There is a danger in overestimating narrowcasting and niching as defining characteristics of the post-network era. Doing so ignores the reality of evolving industrial practices and shifting industrial economics.

In the post-network era during the 2000s, large audiences often have been more economically viable than a small sub-group of loyal viewers. In fact, Byron Allen, the television personality and head of syndication company Entertainment Studios, argues that the term "niche" is so irrelevant that it is no longer an accurate descriptor of cable viewers. This is because, with the increase in viewership overall, the television audience as a whole has gotten to be quite large. At the 2011 Cable Show in Chicago, Illinois on June 14, 2011, Allen asked, "When you have a universe of seven billion customers, is that really a niche? It's a really large audience out there, and when you have a small percentage of that group, you have a large audience. Can you really even say that's niche?" Taking comments such as these into consideration, I contend that our understanding of the first phase of the post-network era must be modified and expanded to include widercasting as a phenomenon.[3]

Turner Broadcasting initiated the widercasting practice by branding TNT and TBS with mainstream, broadcast-like brands such as "TNT Knows Drama" and "TBS: Very Funny." Having a flexible, broad brand allows a network to do more with the brand – to move it easily across platforms and around the globe, to rationalize programming choices because just about any program can be promoted as a fit for a wide-ranging brand, and to justify any decisions executives need/want to make, such as the decision to cancel and sell World Championship Wrestling, which Turner canceled after the AOL-Time Warner merger in 2001 and argued didn't fit the network brand. Essentially, a generic brand can be anything the network wants it to be. The branding strategy, simply put, is that there isn't one – just as the broadcast networks successfully exist without a clearly defined brand. Emulating certain aspects of broadcast has been financially advantageous to general entertainment networks in the early post-network era. The reason for establishing a "brand" in the first place is to give the cable network the ability to accomplish anything the executives wanted, such as obtaining higher carriage fees, steeply priced advertising rates, partnerships with a larger range of advertisers, and ratings success. I

[3] There is, of course, a difference in the way that widercasting functions for a niche cable network, such as Syfy, versus a general entertainment network, such as TBS or TNT. This chapter will define and analyze how widercasting is utilized by general entertainment networks and TBS and TNT specifically.

will touch on these benefits of post-network era branding and others throughout this chapter, but first, it is important to fully define widercasting as a concept and explain how it came into being.

2.1. Factors Contributing to Widercasting

There are three key reasons for why widercasting developed: 1) the prevalence of new media technologies; 2) an increase in audience fragmentation; and 3) the unique economic structure of basic cable networks. In terms of new technologies, the rise of DVRs, online/mobile viewing, and DVD sets of full series made it more possible than ever to see every episode of a television program. For the first time since television's initial diffusion, if water-cooler talk centered on an episode or entire series a viewer missed, it became possible to catch up quickly and join the conversation. Nic Covey, the director of cross-platform insights at Nielsen says, "Americans today have an insatiable appetite for not only content, but also choice. Across all age groups, we see consumers adding the Internet and mobile devices to their media diet — consuming media anytime and anywhere possible" (Nielsen n.p.). And the number of consumers participating in time and place shifting has been constantly on the rise. 2012 statistics show that 52% percent of American households owned DVRs, 84% of people watched television online and 22% stream television on digital platforms (Svensson; Hess; Nielsen). While mobile and internet viewing became more prevalent, Nielsen reported consistent growth among viewing on traditional TV sets as well. In the early post-network era, it was not merely possible to consume more television, but viewers actually did so. A 2011 Nielsen study found that the average American household watched a record number of 59 hours and 28 minutes of television per week (Barnhart, 2011). But while the pie may be bigger, the slices of that pie have grown much smaller.

Those shrinking pie slices can be attributed to the second factor leading to the growth of widercasting as a widespread cable industry strategy: audience fragmentation, which began during the multichannel era and, exacerbated by new technologies, continued to grow in the post-network era. The proliferation of cable networks over the past few decades provided television viewers with a plethora of choices and subsequently separated the audience into different segments. Fragmentation spread audience ratings across multiple networks and minimized the share any individual broadcast network brought in. Of course, "The Big Three" broadcast networks were the main source of information and entertainment for decades until cable networks came on the scene in the 1970s and 1980s, but their share of the audience has since eroded. For example, in 1980, the famous *Dallas* (1978-1991) episode that revealed "Who Shot J.R.?" had a record 53.3 rating and 83 million viewers, one of the highest rated episodes ever. In 1993, the series finale of *Cheers* (1982-1993) brought in a 45.5 rating, and *Friends* (1994-2004) averaged a 15.3 rating during its run. In contrast, in 2010, top-rated show *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-current) won its timeslot with a 3.5 rating and a season average of 13.4 million viewers (cf. Castleman & Podrazik; Nielsen; Sandomir). It takes lower ratings to secure the status of a hit show because audiences have more shows to choose from. In a 2010 *Broadcasting & Cable* article, media critic Melissa Grego writes, "Executives interviewed for this article admitted that in 2010, a heretofore lowly 3 rating in the 18-49 demo[graphic] should be considered a general benchmark for success, with a 4 signifying a hit and a 5 a smash hit" (Grego n.p.). Broadcast networks have seen a ratings decline as more viewers turned to cable programming. Cable, however, has seen a rise in viewership and ratings over the past decade. It may seem like common sense to assume that audience fragmentation would lead to further niching, but in the face of increased competition, cable networks have employed widercasting as a strategy to appeal to a larger number of viewers. Once the audiences became too small to be economically viable, networks responded by changing their branding and programming strategies to welcome more audience members into the viewing community. Thus, branding was both more meaningful as practice, but also an empty signifier that could be perceived in any number of ways by industry figures as well as audiences. Communicating about the brand to industry insiders, such as advertisers, operators, distributors, and content creators, via trade publications has been as important to network executives as publicizing the brand to viewers. This highlights the performativity aspect of the branding process.

Besides trade and mainstream media coverage about the brand, original programming functions as another way to promote the network to both intra-industrially and to audiences. Thus, it is no surprise that cable networks became more focused on original content at the same time that widercasting emerged. There are several reasons why both developed concurrently, and the first is branding and programming are inextricably linked in a symbiotic relationship with each being dependent on the other. The increased audience fragmentation that took place in the early part of the post-network era was due in part to the rise of more cable competitors. A higher number of cable networks existing simultaneously meant that there were more competitors for broadcast reruns. Cable networks needed to find a better way to stand out to viewers in a crowded marketplace and needed to fill their schedules with programming. Widercasting and airing original series were two effective ways to respond to these challenges. Lastly, networks that own their content are better poised to succeed in a new media world where they have no obstacles to moving their programming across platforms. Widercasting and original series production worked together to provide distinct advantages in the post-network era.

TNT launched its first post-network era original series in 2001, *Witchblade* (2001-2002; produced by multiple studios, but not any within the Time Warner family), which premiered with a 2.7 rating and over 2 million households viewing nationwide. This was 60% higher than TNT's year-to-date prime time average of a 1.7 rating and was basic cable's highest-rated series launch in history. Its first season averaged 3.2 million viewers. Compare that to the premiere of TNT's megahit *The Closer* (2005-2012) in 2005, which averaged 5.26 million households.[4] That program had an average rating of 3.5, but season three saw a series high of a 5.1 rating with over six million viewing households and over nine million total viewers. The seventh season premiered in 2011 to an impressive 7.2 million total viewers, suggesting the successful employment of widercasting as a branding and programming strategy during this specific historical moment. The unique conditions of the first phase of the post-network era leveled the playing field and opened up the opportunity for cable networks to better compete with broadcast for viewership. It is easier for cable networks to take ratings and advertisement budgets away from their broadcast counterparts if their programming is on par as well. This is why general entertainment networks have fared better in the post-network era than niche networks in terms of ratings and revenue. Audiences fragmented into such small viewing blocks that the pendulum had to swing in the opposite direction with cable networks widening the narrowcasting model in hopes of drawing in larger crowds. They have to be reassembled, and the widercasting practice becomes a means of doing so. Niche audiences have simply gotten too small to be profitable. The fragmented audience, along with the expansion of channels and viewing platforms (online

[4] Though these two programs – *Witchblade* (2001-2002) and *The Closer* (2005-2012) – are difficult to compare because they are in different genres, they were selected to illustrate TNT's successful use of widercasting as well as the network's commitment to developing original series. Furthermore, the comparison illuminates the success of widercasting as it grew over time and its ability to increase ratings and attract a large segment of the audience. The role that original programming plays in widercasting and in branding strategies as a whole will be discussed in a later section within this chapter along with how the networks' use of widercasting changed as it expanded the strategy.

and mobile), pose major financial threats to the television industry. This, in turn, has impacted the third element leading to the development of widercasting.

This chapter opened by discussing media coverage of Conan O'Brien's move from broadcast to cable and cited a number of headlines presuming that this move signaled that cable was eclipsing broadcast.[5] It is indisputable that the cable industry has seen its ratings and profits rise steadily as its broadcast counterparts have seen a decline. Indeed, I identify that one aspect of widercasting involves cable networks' adoption of certain characteristics of broadcast. However, it is important to note that this does not mean that cable networks want to be broadcast or want to fully duplicate broadcast practices – or that they even could because, as has already been discussed, the two types of networks have very different industrial structures. Furthermore, while widercasting is a strategy that emulates broadcast networks in many ways, cable networks by no means want to eradicate their broadcast counterparts, and of course, many broadcast networks share the same parent companies as some cable networks. When pressed, cable executives explicitly defend the broadcast model against extinction and assert its viability and strength. Indeed, their fate is tied to linear TV models more broadly. Just as it is in cable's economic interest to widen their programming and branding strategies, many cable nets, including TBS and TNT, still depend heavily upon broadcast for syndication deals and sports partnerships. In actuality, cable networks are using widercasting to cherry-pick the more attractive and lucrative elements of the broadcast model that are the most useful for their purposes. For example, while TBS was happy to "steal" Conan away from a broadcast network

[5] Of course, Conan's show was not TBS's first venture into late night. A 2006 *Broadcasting & Cable* article declared the daypart as the "newest battlefield" and noted TBS entering the fray with improv-based comedies such as *10 Items or Less* (2006-2009) was "…yet another sign that, to paraphrase the lyric, it begins to sell 'round midnight' (Grossman, 2006, p. 23)." Interestingly, that article was titled "No Longer a Sports Also-Ran: Cable Makes Deeper Strides in Broadcast Territory."

in order to secure a bigger piece of the late night pie, that does not necessarily mean that TBS will make a run at *The Today Show* (1952-current) by taking up a morning news program. Certainly cherry-picking which broadcast strategies to adopt is nothing new in terms of how cable networks have always worked in relation to broadcast, but the iteration of this tendency to borrow from broadcast is happening more aggressively in the post-network era. Acquiring a comedic late night talk show was an easy transition for TBS – the "Very Funny" network. In addition, Conan airs multiple times per night and does not have a Friday night show – these are key differences from a broadcast network's late night talk show and support my claim that cable networks select certain features of the broadcast model and ignore those that are less advantageous. They are doing the same with certain elements of the cable model, and this brings me to the third factor contributing to widercasting. Cable's unique business model is more stable than broadcast's in the post-network era.

Cable operates from a dual revenue stream – collecting profits from both advertisers and subscriber fees. This financial structure positions cable at an advantage over their broadcast counterparts, which exist on ad dollars and retransmission fees. Although broadcast networks struggle with lower ratings than in the past, cable networks can succeed with moderate ratings because they collect subscriber fees from viewers and non-viewers alike. In addition, multiple runs of a single program or episode allow cable networks to aggregate ratings in ways that are unavailable to their broadcast counterparts. That is not to say that ratings are unimportant in cable; as a network's ratings rise, so do the rates they can charge advertisers. Part of cable's aggressive motivation to emulate broadcast programs is to reach related ad rate levels, and it appears to be working because in the post-network era, cable networks' ratings and profits are higher than ever before due to their growing viewership and dual revenue stream. In 2011, TNT brought in $2 billion in ad revenue alone – though still significantly less than Fox, which amassed $3.1 billion that same year (Steinberg, 2012; Ramachandran, 2012). Add to that, the $1.16 per subscriber they average for over 99 million cable subscribers in the U.S., and it is easy to see how profitable the cable industry can be in the post-network era (Weprin, 2012). Yet networks are constantly seeking more growth to satisfy investors and maximize profits, which is where widercasting comes in.

In 2013, AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010-current) was the top-rated show of the night; with 12.3 million viewers and 6.1 rating in adults 18-49, it broke a cable ratings record and beat out broadcast hits such as *Once Upon a Time* (2011-current; 2.2 18-49 rating, 7.08 total viewers). In recent years, with the increase in ratings, cable networks concurrently raised their advertisement rates, and in both 2011 and 2012, cable took in combined upfront sales that exceeded that of broadcast[6] (James, 2011, n.p.). Higher ad revenue combined with the millions brought in from subscriber fees provides cable with higher profit margins than their broadcast counterparts (Arango and Carter, 2009, n.p.). Another benefit with cable's business model is that it has much lower overall production expenses than the broadcast nets, in part because cable produces fewer programs. A recent study revealed that cable networks spend about 25 cents per viewer on production yet collect 85 cents per viewer in ad revenue (Mermigas, 2009, n.p.). Lower production costs combined with growing ratings and subscriber fees means that successful cable networks, such as USA and ESPN, have higher profit margins than broadcast – earning anywhere between 40 to 60 percent compared to broadcast's slim margin of 10 percent (Arango & Carter, 2009, n.p.).

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[6] In 2011, all the cable networks that participated in the annual upfront season took in a combined total of advertising sales that exceeded the combined total for the broadcast networks. This is significant in that it demonstrates the financial strength and vitality of the cable industry and because cable historically generates less advertising sales than broadcast.

Widening cable networks' program appeal and brand identity has helped some of them, including TNT and TBS, succeed financially. In a crowded media environment where new technologies exacerbate audience fragmentation and overload viewers with content, it is difficult for a network to be noticed. In the economy of the early 2000s, advertisers were overly cautious about spending and just as confused as viewers about which networks best suit their needs. Indeed, advertiser uncertainty has contributed to the decision by cable networks to rethink their branding strategies. Broadening their scope in branding and target demographics is a matter of economic necessity as it brings in more viewers for advertisers. In the media landscape from 2001 to 2011, it was almost impossible to compete with just a small segment of the audience. To better understand these shifts, I will now take a sharper look at widercasting by using a case study of Turner networks TBS and TNT.

2.2. Branding TBS and TNT

As stated above, there are several main goals that cable network executives aim to accomplish when they employ branding tactics and widercasting in particular. These motivations include higher advertising revenue, higher ratings, higher subscriber fees, and greater opportunity to secure lucrative advertising deals and partnerships. In addition to these factors, Turner had another reason to brand TBS and TNT, which was to differentiate the sister networks and prevent audience members and advertisers from confusing the pair. The first approach taken to separate the two networks was in 2000 when TBS briefly adopted the brand and slogan, "TV Haven for the Regular Guy." A year later, TNT followed up with the same brand it continued to assert until a slight modification in 2014 – "TNT: We Know Drama." The difference from the early iteration of the drama network's brand was because TNT executives' believed that upscale viewers were the target demographic, and the former slogans did not convey that. In 2000, former CEO Jamie Kellner articulated it in this way:

> [TNT's audience is] an upscale couple. TNT's target audience profile is a couple, about 37 years old, living in a suburb of a major city, a top 20-market city, $75,000-plus household income, kids, husband and wife could be working. College-educated. They probably watch about 15 percent to 20 percent less television than the average American, but what they are looking for are quality programs on television. And that's where TNT is positioning itself. (Hogan, 2000, p. 6)

This quote is useful in a number of ways. Firstly, Kellner described the ideal target demographic for any major advertiser in the country and strategically used his interview with *Multichannel News* to communicate to those specific advertisers that TNT wanted that sought-after viewership block. His inclusion of the detail that TNT viewers watch less television than the average American is, I assert, his way of telling advertisers that TNT, not USA or FX, was the only place where they could reach this desirable demographic. The article does not cite any data to support or debunk his claims because trade publications typically function more as a mouthpiece for industry insiders than as a legitimate, objective journalistic endeavor (Caldwell, 2008). The subgroup Kellner described was targeted by network executives with the initial "We Know Drama" branding campaign and its corresponding programming slate – or more aptly speaking, this is the subgroup that network executives wanted advertisers to think they were targeting regardless of whether they were or if they even could deliver those viewers.

At this point, it is important to draw attention to the use of the phrase "quality programs on television" because its inclusion of the loaded term "quality."[7] Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi

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[7] Ideas about quality television and the so-called quality TV audience have many inherent problems due to the innate hierarchy set-up by the adulation of upscale, educated viewers. Critics, such as Turow (1997; 2006; 2012) of such discourses argue that this system of privileging certain types of viewers over others exacerbates inequalities that already exist within society. In my discussion of these issues, I am merely presenting the fact that advertisers, and therefore television networks, prefer such viewers and am not engaging in the debate over the challenges presented by the concepts.

(1985), in their seminal work *MTM Quality Television*, describe the quality TV audience in similar ways to Kellner's depiction. Feuer et al's (1985) "quality TV" audience is a group of viewers who are liberal, sophisticated, upwardly-mobile and sophisticated. Jaramillo (2002) defines "quality programs [as] those that appeal to young, urban adults from 18 to 34 years of age" and that display an "authorial style" and "cinematic" aesthetic (p. 66-67). Thompson (1997) expanded on Feuer's (1985) premise a bit when he wrote that the quality TV audience is "upscale, well-educated, urban-dwelling, young viewers advertisers so desire to reach…" (p. 14). Both Feuer (1985) and Thompson (1997) explicitly state that a quality TV program is an hour-long drama, not a comedy, so it also makes sense that if TNT targeted a quality audience then executives would focus on dramas. Another possible explanation for Kellner's verbiage is that Turner executives were chasing the kind of success HBO enjoyed at the time by attracting this desired group of viewers with high-rated and critically acclaimed quality dramas. HBO's relationship with the discourse on quality television will be discussed in the next chapter.

When TNT launched its "We Know Drama" catchphrase and marketing push in 2001, it featured ads with athletes and celebrities, such as Shaquille O'Neal, Whoopi Goldberg and Dennis Hopper, offering up their own answer to the question "What is drama?" The ads, which did not appear to be scripted (but likely were), showcased just how broad and far-reaching the brand identity was. Their definitions varied widely – for example, actress Allison Janney said drama was running out of jelly doughnuts and a NASCAR driver said it was "life at 190 miles an hour." In 2003, Steve Koonin had this to say about the drama brand: "We're like the wine steward of dramas. We don't necessarily grow the grapes, crush the grapes, or bottle the grapes, but we sure as hell know drama" (Rice, 2003, p. A16). The quote hinted at the well-known aversion that Turner had to producing original series, which will be addressed in greater detail in the following section. In the press release announcing the new brand identity, Koonin described it thusly, “TNT’s promise is to engage the hearts and minds of our viewers with dramatic programming that offers a powerful combination of compelling stories and interesting characters, mixed with excitement, action, suspense, romance, and humor.” Five years later, the drama tag was stretched to apply to any programming TNT aired such as “crime and punishment and mystery solving, aspirational reality shows, and programs that depict interesting people and places” (Moss, 2008, p. 12). Many of those depictions could describe just about any show, and that is a benefit permissible by widercasting. The brand doesn’t have to be strictly adhered to as long as it is memorable, attention-getting and is supported by high ratings in key demographics. A broad brand provides a network with flexibility in terms of programming selections (more options are available if just about anything is a fit), which means more viewers are welcomed into the viewing community. More viewers means higher ratings, translating to larger ad revenue and ad rates, all of which are key motivating factors behind the adoption of widercasting as a strategy. As TNT marketing exec Scott Safon told *Variety*, “Our core viewers love championship-driven sports events and movies, and this branding initiative gives us a lens to look through to find even more programming” (Kissell, 2001, p. A6). This is a classic example of how the brand matters as much for communicating to key industry stakeholders via trade publications as it does to the network-audience relationship, and a broad, flexible broad offers advantages in mitigating to both sets of publics. Network executives were upfront in media interviews about the benefits afforded by the flexibility of the “We Know Drama” brand and its corresponding new logo, which Koonin said “allows us to do 100 different things” (Hogan, 2001, n.p.). Based upon their programming from 2001 to 2011, the only thing TNT is *not* about is comedy, which, of course, is a territory that has been claimed by sister network TBS.

Brad Siegel, president of general entertainment networks at Turner from 1999 to 2003, said that focus groups were conducted to determine how to brand TNT and that the "drama lovers group really emerged as a unique group" (Higgins, 2001, p. 27). Interestingly, Siegel also noted in the interview that TNT's audience were "heavier TV watchers," which, of course, contradicts Kellner's earlier assertion that TNT viewers watch less television than the average. Such contradictions serve as evidence that quotes given to trade publications are more puffery than substance, and this one in particular bolsters my contention that Kellner made his comments in a strategic attempt to attract advertisers to TNT. In 2011, Jennifer Dorian (then the vice president of strategy development and currently the chief strategy officer at Turner) explained that TNT had aired drama programs and movies for awhile before the network was assigned the label. She said:

> TNT was already known for its drama series. So it wasn't like we were redoing the network. But no one else was capitalizing on that concept. We were doing it the best and we just started letting people know that. (Editor, 2011, p. 42)

Some industry experts were skeptical of the brand initially. A *San Francisco Gate* article bitingly titled "Slogan Without Substance" criticized the tagline by saying that "there's no surplus of evidence that they know drama" (Carman, 2001). An industry critic with *Broadcasting & Cable* said the brand was "a bit of a stretch" and then pointed out, "It will be interesting to see how the regular guy responds to seeing *Pretty Woman* [on TBS] and how the drama lover responds to seeing *Austin Powers* [on TNT] (Higgins, 2001, p. 27). Regardless of the inconsistencies in programming that may have existed, TNT's ratings did rise after it adopted the "We Know Drama" slogan. From 2001 to 2002 alone, TNT's ratings rose 30%, and in the summer of 2005, it was the first cable network to outperform two broadcast networks (Romano, 2003; Moss, 2005).

In 2004, TBS saw great success as well after it took on the "Very Funny" brand, and in terms of both money and ratings, the network was leading the industry. The network's median age dropped in one year from 40 to 36, which is still a record for cable television. Although TBS did briefly adopt the "TV Haven for the Regular Guy" slogan in 2001, there was not much of a promotional push or programming shift in response. Very few trade publications covered it other than mentioning it in a sentence or two within an article on a different topic. Furthermore, when TBS launched its "Very Funny" brand three years later, the network also dropped "Superstation" from its official name – a move I contend that is both a symbolic and literal indication that the multichannel era had ended and the post-network era had begun. It also further demarcates the "Very Funny" brand from "TV Haven for the Regular Guy."

In 2003, Koonin spoke to *Multichannel News* about Turner executives' search for a brand identity to fit TBS and said that they would brand the network based upon what viewers wanted – just as they did when selecting "We Know Drama" for TNT (Moss, 2003). Turner executives have not consistently presented the narrative of the decision-making process behind their networks' brands, which further suggests the flexibility and veritable emptiness of the brands selected. In a 2001 interview with *Multichannel News* promoting the TNT drama branding campaign, Kellner said, "The drama category has been left open – we have a bunch of guys in the news space, a bunch of guys in the sports space and comedy" (Umstead, 2001, p. 32). In a 2003 interview about the TBS brand, Koonin reiterated, "Consumers said there was a vacuum for drama, and a big need for a network dedicated to drama" (Moss, 2003, p. 8). He did not make an equivalent statement regarding whether or not there was a need for a channel dedicated to comedy, as Kellner had two years earlier. But Koonin did make several comments about selecting the TBS brand in the same manner and for similar reasons as the process for dedicating TNT to the drama genre.

Of course, there already was a cable network for viewers who enjoyed comedy. In 1989, Time Warner launched The Comedy Channel, and the following year, Viacom launched another comedy-themed cable network called Ha! (Hall, 1989). After briefly competing with one another, the two merged to form Comedy Central, which was co-owned by Time Warner and Viacom until Viacom bought Time Warner's half in April of 2003 – a mere six days before Koonin's interview with *Mulitchannel News* was published (Reuters, 2003). TBS did not officially become "Very Funny" until the summer of 2004, but it is likely that the sale of Comedy Central may have factored into that decision to, along with the obvious value in synchronizing brand identities with sister net TNT.

The launch of the "Very Funny" brand coincided with TBS' launch of *Sex and the City* in syndication for the first time. The series was regarded as "the centerpiece of the campaign" and though TBS paid a hefty fee of around $450,000 per episode (rumors had the price as high as possibly $700-$750K), the money was kept in the Time Warner family, and the deal is an excellent example of post-AOL-merger synergy (Editor, 2004, p. 13A). Additionally, TBS used syndicated hits like *Friends* (1994-2004; produced by Warner Brothers)*, Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005; produced by four production companies, including sister net HBO) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004; also an HBO co-production) as lead-ins for new reality shows like *The Real Gilligan's Island* (2004-2005; co-production from Next Entertainment, DAWN Syndicated Productions, and Telepictures Productions). Later on, the network moved into producing and airing original scripted series as well. Significantly, the branding campaign for TBS was honored with a Brand Builder Award in 2004 and again in 2008 for "Department of

Humor Analysis" network promos, which was a series of ads featuring individuals calling actor John Cleese at a call center in TBS headquarters. The caller would then describe a situation and ask him whether or not it was funny. As an extension of the network's commitment to being "very funny," advertisers that sought to air a commercial during both original and syndicated prime-time sitcoms on TBS produced commercials that were "deemed and branded 'Very Funny Advertising'" (Othmer, 2009, p. 257). Entertaining and amusing ads were consistent with the network brand, fit the programs they appeared within, and could potentially combat viewer churn as well. Unique advertising opportunities, such as these, can be seen as made possible by having a flexible, broad brand.

At this time, industry experts did not agree whether TBS and TNT had established broad or niche brands with one critic who claimed that TNT and TBS "try to attract broad audiences" and another who said "TBS has found a niche with comedy" (Higgins, 2001, p. 22; Becker, 2005, p. 20). TNT's "We Know Drama" campaign launched with a series of promotional spots poking fun at niche networks. These ads were constructed as mock advertisements of fictional niche cable networks, such as The All-Baldwin Network, which featured actor Stephen Baldwin engaging in various mundane activities such as eating a sandwich and playing the guitar and ended with the tagline, "TNT: We know dramas. They know Baldwins" (Forkan, 2002, p. 24). Other examples in the series included the Mah Jongg Network, Baggage Claim Network, and Crossing Guard Network. With these promos, TNT deliberately positioned itself in opposition to networks with a more niche focus. Conversely, the following year, Koonin said that when they branded TNT, they did so by narrowing its focus and pledged to do the same with TBS because the strategy was successful – "We grew our ratings and grew our revenue by shrinking" (Moss, 2003, p. 8). Widercasting operates differently for general entertainment networks, for which a desire to avoid the "niche" label was a motivating factor behind the networks' brands, as a mid-level Turner executive explained to me in a personal interview in 2010. He said:

> …networks are beginning to realize that "niche" is not the same as "brand." They're starting to move away from "niching" and focus on "branding" as a way to broaden their appeal while also developing/maintaining a distinct identity in the market. For example, TNT's "We Know Drama" and TBS' "very funny" taglines convey strong brands and, they, well, they establish each network's identity without limiting the networks' appeal to niche audiences.[8] (Personal communication, May 7, 2010)

TNT and TBS chose brands that provided much-needed focus to their networks and communicated clearly to advertisers and audiences what they could expect from the networks. Though this process necessitated a slight refinement in their scope, the executives shaped the branding and programming under an umbrella large enough to provide depth as well as breadth. Most importantly, it retained the historic flexibility and reach afforded to TNT and TBS as general entertainment networks.

In the following sections, I argue that Turner's use of widercasting is evident by looking at three different business strategies it employed: 1) moving into airing original programming; 2) expanding into late night; and 3) cultivating unique advertising opportunities with select sponsors. I will further address why having a broad brand matters in terms of how we understand the evolving television industry, the cable industry specifically – TBS and TNT in particular – and how we think about the meanings of television in the post-network era.

2.3. Turner Originals

TNT first ventured into original scripted programming in the late-1990s with short-lived action and/or fantasy series, such as *The Lazarus Man* (1996)*, The New Adventures of Robin*

[8] Turner's department of public relations officially denied all my formal and informal requests to interview employees of Turner Broadcasting for this dissertation project, but one employee agreed to speak with me on a condition of complete confidentiality and anonymity.

Hood (1997-1998)*, Crusade* (1999)*, L.A. Heat* (1996-1999) and the fifth season of *Babylon 5* (1994-1998). Early attempts floundered for a number of reasons noted below, and neither TNT nor TBS prioritized airing original series until TNT first broadcast ratings hit *The Closer* (2005-2012) in the mid-2000s, finally catching up to competing cable networks' embrace of original series. Until that time, in fact, executives expressed a downright aversion to originals altogether. In an article that discussed the different programming strategies employed at HBO versus the Turner networks, television industry critic R. Thomas Umstead credited Turner head Jamie Kellner for the policy to eschew originals. Whereas Umstead says HBO "turned itself around" with its focus on developing hit originals, TNT and TBS chose another path. He explained: "Kellner, on the other hand, has relied less on original fare and more on acquired movies and top off-network series to help build general-entertainment networks Turner Network Television and TBS Superstation" (Umstead, 2002, p. 3). This was true of many cable networks at the time, although Turner was especially slow at expanding into that arena.

One reason given for Turner's aversion was simple economics. Turner Entertainment Networks president Brad Siegel stated that originals were financially "risky" and added, "We can't afford to be in that business, given our commitment to all the other programming we're investing in" (Umstead, 2002, p. 66). In his two years at Turner, Kellner put most of his energy into emphasizing a synergy-centric strategy known as "repurposing," which had increasingly been used across cable since the 1990s (Lotz, 2007). Repurposing involves sharing programs between sister networks. As the founder of The WB Network (and chair of both The WB and Turner simultaneously), Kellner pushed for WB programs, such as *Charmed,* to air on TNT. The hallmark catchphrase and internal mandate of the AOL Time Warner merger was "synergy," and repurposing was a natural expansion out of that corporate philosophy.

Repurposing was utilized, though never embraced as fully as Kellner wanted. He resigned in 2003 after two years amidst rumors that he didn't enjoy working in Atlanta as much as Los Angeles. Kellner was just one of several high level executives to leave during this time. According to trade publication coverage analyzed for this project, Kellner was never fully accepted by Turner employees and never fully embraced the Turner culture either (Donohue, 2001; Umstead, 2003; Higgins, 2001). Upon his exit, many of the executives he hired left Turner as well, which was another signal that Kellner's philosophy was not a fit for the Turner culture. Kellner's replacement was Phil Kent, a former president of CNN. Umstead noted, "Turner executives like Kent, who knows the company's inner workings and is considered less of a maverick than the aggressive Kellner" (2003, p. 3).

The same 2003 article included a mention that Betty Cohen resigned as president at Cartoon Network after Kellner cut back on original programming there. That observation implied that the policy may have caused problems for Kellner. In analyzing media coverage, of course, it is always important to note points of contradiction and apparent disagreement. This is evident, for example, in the discussion of Steve Koonin, then the EVP and general manager at TNT, who was interviewed in December of 2001 for an article on the network's new branding efforts. While Kellner was pushing for repurposing in interviews, Koonin here discussed the importance of pursuing original series. He said, "The No. 1 recipe would be the development of original series. That would help define us" (Umstead, 2001, p. 25). Interestingly, Koonin was promoted to the chief operating officer over TNT and TBS after Kellner left.[9] I interpret this to

[9] Unlike many television executives, Koonin's background was primarily in consumer goods and retail. He came to Turner not from another network, but from Coca-Cola. As a result, it is safe to assume that his approach to marketing and branding is rooted in retail rather than media. In this way, his tenure as Turner chief is in keeping with the Time Warner tradition of being managed by outsiders.

mean that the AOL-Time Warner executives (along with Phil Kent) agreed more with Koonin on originals than Kellner. Indeed, Turner's approach to originals moved into a new phase soon after Koonin's promotion to C.O.O. Many articles mentioned his "intent on reviving original scripted development" (Romano, 2003, p. 8). While there were various observations about executives scouting for original series to produce at this time, members of the Turner team expressly communicated that TBS and TNT had shifted the focus from original series to original "limited series runs," of which a stated goal was to air one to two per year. These, of course, were essentially miniseries, a format which broadcast networks had stopped producing by the beginning of the 21st century so there was ample opportunity for cable networks to succeed. Lifetime's executive vice president of research, Tim Brooks, said that in the early 2000s, cable networks were better positioned to do well with miniseries: "Cable has something broadcast didn't. We have brands. And miniseries are tied to the brand of the network making them…" (Moss, 2005, p. 30).

One small way Turner used programming to further brand and differentiate TBS and TNT involved its decision to have TBS focus on original films while TNT concentrated on original miniseries. It has long been a practice for mini-series and TV movies to be a gateway into original series, and Turner was at the forefront of this practice. Several of the TNT miniseries were Westerns, including *Monte Walsh* (2003)*, Crossfire Trail* (2001), and *Into the West* (2005). Steven Spielberg was the executive producer of the twelve-hour miniseries *Into the West* (2005), which ran in six two-hour installments in 2005 and cost the network $50 million (Moss, 2005). It was a huge hit – actually besting broadcast networks WB and UPN in key ratings for the week it aired. While the ratings success of TNT's miniseries likely translated to sizeable ad revenue, the other appealing aspect of undertaking the miniseries format (and, in fact, any original programming) is that it provided the network with an opportunity to define its brand. Decisions regarding programming are one of the main tools used by executives when branding a network, but that branding also gets articulated and strengthened in the promotions for those programs.

Turner execs strategically decided not to reinvent the wheel and in a smart but risk-avoidance move, endeavored to continue to use genres and strategies that had previously worked for the network. Although possibly influenced by HBO's hit with Western *Deadwood,* the early successes with the narrow Western genre led to the production and airing of more Westerns – even at a time when TNT was attempting to carve out a brand identity for itself that broadened its audience. Though the network continued to air and produce Westerns, executives repeatedly asserted that the drama brand was not synonymous with only one genre. In 2000, Brad Siegel contended, "TNT does not want to be known as a Western network" (Moss, 2000, p. 72). Three years later, TNT COO Steve Koonin was also careful to avoid the Western label when he promoted *Into the West* (2005), saying what he wanted instead was for the series to appeal to a broader demographic than those with such a niche interest. He described it as "…a story about the growth of our country, not cowboys and Indians," and although the vast majority of Turner's early original miniseries were Westerns, according to *Multichannel News* writer Linda Moss, Koonin "defined a TNT movie as far broader than that single genre" (Romano, 2003, p. 19; Moss, 2003, p. 8B).

Such incongruous moments are important to note. When a network executive makes a public statement that conflicts with actions currently being undertaken by that network, it is valuable to analyze the divergent discourses involved. I interpret statements from Siegel, Koonin, and others as revealing the power dynamics at work. Viewers and journalists may see

TNT airing Westerns and assume that it is a Western-themed network; however, that would be too limiting for Turner's goals and would be too niche to accurately describe all programs on the network, such as the very popular *Law and Order* (1990-2010), which does not fit that genre. Network executives ultimately define a network's brand. They accomplish this by selecting programs to air and also in interviews with the media, but they also utilize many more complex techniques and strategies to communicate the desired messages to audiences and advertisers alike. What quotes like those from Siegel and Koonin offered up was a promise to advertisers that TNT delivered an audience that is broad, and therefore, attractive. This claim would then be used in attempts to raise ad rates and revenue.

Linda Yaccarino, EVP and general manager of Turner Entertainment Sales and Marketing at the time, said, "*Into the West* is the biggest, best example yet of Turner's efforts - this time specifically TNT - to deliver to our audience programming that is accelerating the close of the gap between broadcast and cable" (Moss, 2005, p. 30). I argue that a key component of widercasting is the goal of cable networks not to <u>be</u> broadcast networks, but to take on some of the more desirable and lucrative features of broadcast networks. Cable networks adopted the miniseries format because it allowed them to slowly venture into original programming and helped them establish and shape a brand identity. However, as Yaccarino's comment revealed, the ultimate objective was to provide programming that appealed to a "mainstream" audience more traditionally at home on broadcast networks. Behind the stated ambition of attracting broadcast-type audiences is the real goal – attracting broadcast-level advertising rates.

After seeing success in terms of ratings and ad revenue from its miniseries, Turner executives decided it was time to branch out into original scripted series. Just as it had done by continuing to air Westerns because of previous ratings success with the genre, Turner selected its first original series in several years, *The Closer* (2005-2012) and *Wanted* (2005; the former, of course, being the bigger hit), based on the high ratings TNT garnered when it aired *Law & Order* (1990-2010) reruns. In fact, TNT used *Law & Order* (1990-2010) as a "model" and "developed *The Closer*…in the vein of *Law & Order* in an effort to transition viewers from the off-network hit to an original series" (Umstead, 2010, p. 9). Michael Wright, EVP and head of programming for TBS, TNT, and Turner Classic Movies at the time, admitted that in meetings with television writers, the TNT executives outright stated, "…[W]e're looking for a show that *Law & Order* fans would recognize and be drawn to, but have its own voice and be distinctive" (Umstead, 2010, p. 9). Of course, the strategy worked. In June of 2005, *The Closer* (2005-2012) debuted with a 4.8 household rating and 7.03 million total viewers – the highest-rated series in basic cable history at the time – and it continued to enjoy high ratings as the top cable series until it bowed in 2012. It is important to point out, as Derek Kompare (2005) does, that this is not a new tactic or one unique to the Turner networks. Though he was not specifically discussing Turner, Kompare (2005) explains this trend more generally, "Although the media and the market mechanisms have changed, the programming itself has remained thoroughly predictable; in fact, save the odd minute or two shaved off to fit more advertising, it has often been completely identical to what had gone before" (p. 134).

Of the strategy to emulate *Law & Order* (1990-2010) when developing its original series, Wright added that *L&O* was "one of the most defining shows on the network" (Umstead, 2010, p. 9). This is an interesting admission when put into the larger context of claims made by Turner executives about how they created and shaped the TNT brand. For example, the week after *The Closer* (2005-2012) brought it record high ratings, Koonin said, "We don't believe that a show makes a brand. First, you brand the network, you program to that, and then you put original programming on where you have strength" (Umstead, 2005, p. 22). In actuality, Turner negotiated a deal back in 1999 with Studios USA to begin airing *Law & Order* (1990-2010) episodes in syndication beginning in 2001. The "We Know Drama" slogan and brand was launched at the Turner Upfronts in spring of that year, a couple of months before the syndicated hit first appeared on TNT.

Creating a cable brand around acquired series is nothing new, of course, as Kompare (2005) asserts:

> …The most significant result of the successful adaptation of the off-network syndication market to cable was the use of reruns to shape and bolster cable networks' identities…The acquisition, scheduling, and promotion of these series indicate that off-network programming, and not original productions, formed the foundation of some of the most popular and powerful cable networks. (p. 179)

In reality, TNT's original programming, *The Closer* (2005-2012), was modeled after a high-rated syndication series whose ratings success influenced the branding of the network – and not the other way around. This turn to original series is also acknowledged by Kompare (2005), who recognizes that reruns can only define a network for so long and that in the post-network era, the role that syndicated programming plays in branding is replaced by the growing number of original series showcased by cable networks.

This chicken-or-the-egg debate, of course, misses the larger point, which is that branding and programming decisions are much more nuanced and are impacted by a variety of industrial and economic factors. Koonin's misleading statement illustrates another example of the benefits that come with having a flexible brand and employing widercasting – executives can allege that a program was chosen based upon its consistency with the brand, and this claim is believable because the brand is so flexible and broad that it can match just about any program. Some of the reasons that guide programming decisions in this particular historical moment included: how desirable the audience is that a series targets, the potential for ratings success based upon what has worked previously and/or the draw of the star/showrunner/producer (as with *The Closer*, 2005-2012), how well the series will match with other shows currently on the schedule, a program's budget, etc.[10] At the 2012 meeting of the Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing, Bravo President Francis Berwick explained the value of originals to cable networks:

> Acquisitions don't help you brand the network either. The original programming becomes definitional, and you want it to be synonymous with your brand, and especially as we move to TV Everywhere. You want people to go there and know, 'Ok, that's a show that I like that I watch on X channel.' I think it's incredibly difficult to do that if you're seen as primarily an acquisitions network.

Matching its branding certainly was a key reason that Turner picked up original series like *The Closer* (2005-2012), which was definitional for TNT, but having a brand also brought important economic benefits. In a 2011 interview, ad sales chief David Levy described Turner's motivations to pursue originals: "…because of three things: Brand recognition, ratings, and CPMs," and though the networks have had their struggles, original programming did help TNT and TBS improve in those key areas during this particular time period (Lafayette, 2011, p. 10).

By the time that TBS adopted its "Very Funny" tagline, executives were more frank in interviews when asked about the process of finding a brand for the network and pairing it with complementary programming. In 2007, for example, Molly Battin, who was senior VP of brand development and digital platforms for TNT, TBS, and Turner Classic Movies, and was recognized by *Broadcasting & Cable* for her contributions to the industry and for her role in the

[10] A discussion of these would, perhaps, be less sexy or attention-getting for an interview with a trade publication. This is a good moment to reiterate that trade publications serve more as a vehicle to promote a network and its programs than as traditional, objective journalism; therefore, comments made by executives in interviews with such media are strategically designed as a marketing tool more than as anything authentic.

recent launch of the "Very Funny" branding campaign. She was a recipient of one of *Broadcasting & Cable*'s annual Brand Builder Awards. She shared:

> We identified viewers that loved comedy with characters and stories to which they could relate. There was a perfect alignment between these viewers and our comedy lineup of *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Everybody Loves Raymond,* and *Sex and the City*… So we put a stake in the ground and said, 'We are going to stand for funny. We are going to become the authorities for funny.' (Albiniak, 2007, p. A10)

Rather than follow Koonin's footsteps and claim the executives tailored the programming to fit the brand, Battin openly admitted that executives chose the "Very Funny" brand after seeing how their audience and their programming already matched. Clarifying, she said, "We took the brand and married it to our programming. That really put a place and a face on the network" (Albiniak, 2007, p. A10).

Again, this oversimplification of the decision-making process behind branding was as performative as it was strategically presented to reinforce and define the network brand. Such reduction is done to promote the brand to three distinct power players within the cable television industry: Brand talk 1) asserts the value of the network (and subscription rate) to cable operators; 2) communicates to advertisers what types of audiences they can expect to find on the network; and 3) lets content owners, such as television production companies, know what types of syndicated and/or original series the network might be interested in purchasing the rights to air. In addition, as previously stated, an inherent value in pursuing widercasting is the flexible nature of the brand and corresponding brand narrative that can be constructed and consolidated. Although Battin described the logic and system behind TBS's branding in a way that contradicted the account offered by Koonin of TNT, the results of such discourse were similar. Just as *The Closer* (2005-2010) was fashioned after *Law & Order* (1990-2010), so too was the

TBS hit series, *My Boys* (2006-2010), a variation on *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), which began syndication on TBS shortly before the new series launched and was used as its lead-in.

This strategy of fashioning cable originals after broadcast's syndication hits[11] is one way that Turner emulates broadcast, and thus, serves as an example of Turner's utilization of widercasting. Other related strategies include airing other shows canceled by broadcast nets, such as *Southland* (2009-2013) and *Cougar Town* (2009-2014), revitalizing broadcast classics like *Dallas* (1978-1991), securing lucrative sports deals traditionally acquired by the Big Four, and, finally, tackling a new daypart with a move into late night. The latter culminated with the acquisition of Conan O'Brien's late night show. In the next section, I show how this move is further evidence of Turner's distinctive approach in the 2000s to cable network branding.

2.4. Late Night

Until recently, late night was mostly presumed to be a daypart dominated by the broadcast networks. Notably, a December 2006 *Broadcasting and Cable* article titled "No Longer a Sports Also-Ran: Cable Makes Deeper Strides in Broadcast Territory," made a prescient observation when it labeled the late night time period as the "newest battlefield" and cited TBS's late night comedy improv show *10 Items or Less* (2006-2009) as evidence along with Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* (1996-current) and *Colbert Report* (2005-2014) (Grossman, 2006, p. 23). Along with quips from network executives, the trade publications' coverage of Turner's encroachment into late night frequently positioned it as a strategy to "take on broadcast" and "beat the broadcast networks at their own game" (Atkinson and Weprin, 2009,

[11] Of course, *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) originally aired on HBO – not a broadcast network.

p. 17). In this particular instance, the framing seems to be an accurate fit, but, of course, cable network strategy is more nuanced and complicated than that.

I posit that cable network executives emulate broadcast networks because they want the same level of profits that broadcast currently enjoys. They want the attractive parts of broadcast without the less convenient, more expensive components of being a broadcaster, such as the inability to re-air the same episode several times or days in a row as the cable networks frequently do. Branching into a new daypart is risky, but it can also carry a number of benefits. These include raising brand awareness, gaining higher ratings in key demographics, and increasing advertising revenue. TBS had a few fits and starts with the short-lived *10 Items* (2006-2009) and *Frank TV* (2007-2008), but then enjoyed moderate success with its first late night talk show, *Lopez Tonight* (2009-2011), featuring popular actor and comedian who notably had previously been on a broadcast sitcom, George Lopez. Lopez was an appealing choice due to his ability to attract two niche groups to the network that are attractive to advertisers – younger viewers aged 18 to 49 and Hispanic viewers. In 2009, Michael Wright as positioned the move in these terms:

> It felt to us like the next logical step in the evolution of the network. We felt this was a great way to expand the reach of the network and to affirm one of the strengths of the network, which is our ability to draw a really young and diverse audience. (Umstead, 2009, p. 22)

The article also pointed out that the late night audience in broadcast had a median age of 50+ and was 75% white (Umstead, 2009). If cable programs like *The Daily Show* (1996-current) had already captured younger viewers during these hours of the night, then it wasn't a stretch to expect to attract a larger share of them with the right program (Rosenthal, 2010). The interesting contradiction exposed here is that while Turner and industry trade publications positioned TBS's move into late night as directly challenging the broadcast networks, a more likely argument could be made that the network instead was attempting to siphon niche audience members away from competing cable shows such as *The Daily Show* (1996-current). Regardless, I contend that the stated and unstated goals were the same: TBS saw the potential to bring in advertising rates comparable to those secured by broadcast's late night shows. While Lopez was a respectable draw for TBS, he didn't quite get them to that point. However, the network's next move into late night was splashier and in many ways more successful.

On June 1, 2009, Conan O'Brien took over as host of *The Tonight Show* (1962-current) at NBC. By January 2010, he had left after several months of declining ratings. Conan's average ratings were down 49% from Leno in total viewers and 23% in the key 18-49 demographic. Where he succeeded, however, was in lowering the median age of the *Tonight Show* (1962-current) viewer. Under Leno, it was 55.6, but in six brief months, Conan got it down to 46.7. When he became available, TBS snatched him up quickly with a lucrative deal. In a specific analysis of Conan as an example of widercasting which follows, I argue that his move helped TBS in three key areas: 1) advertising revenue; 2) enhancing the TBS brand; 3) enabling Turner's move into the digital media environment. While the first of these I will discuss now, the latter will be addressed in the fourth chapter, which looks more closely at the relationship between television and new media as it developed from 2001 to 2011.

Based upon his proven popularity and ability to attract young viewers, TBS initially sold 30-second spots for Conan's show to advertisers at broadcast-level rates in the $30,000-$40,000 range for his debut. Trade publications lauded this as a rare and impressive feat: "O'Brien's TBS Show Draws Broadcast Ad Rates: Turner Has Long Pushed for Ad Parity with Broadcast Nets" (Szalai, 2010); "Broadcast Bucks for Conan: Turner Ad Sales Up 14%" (Crupi, 2010); "Even on cable, Conan's worth just as much as Jay or Dave" (Roberts, 2010); and "Conan's

Contribution: Cash" (Farrell, 2010). Though networks routinely do not release information about advertising rates, a 2013 *Broadcasting & Cable* article mentioned that his rates were comparable to broadcast rates since he launched his TBS show in 2011 (Lafayette, 2013). He also succeeded in lowering the median age of his viewership to 32 – significantly younger than his late night counterparts and two years younger than his predecessor, George Lopez, was able to bring to TBS (de Moraes, 2013; Rosenthal, 2010). Conan's ratings, however young the viewers may have been, were not on par with broadcast and, in fact, have been lower than the numbers he brought to NBC as host of *The Tonight Show* (1962-current). In his first year at TBS, Conan attracted an average of 952,000 total viewers (just 41K more than Lopez), and of those, 668,000 were in the sought-after 18-49 demographic (Lopez had 558,000) with 440,000 in the desirable but hard-to-find 18-34 group (a 28% increase) (Stableford, 2011).

This ratings feat was not his only contribution. Conan also brought (and continues to bring) added value and attention to the TBS brand. The "Very Funny" brand launched in 2004 and was still fairly new and not yet quite defined when Turner acquired Conan's show in 2010. Although they debated whether or not he would bring in the desired ad rates or ratings to TBS upon the announcement of his deal, industry experts unanimously agreed he would have a great impact on the network brand. Four articles in one *Broadcasting & Cable* issue included four different takes on the move. An editorial simply stated, "There is no need for explanation about why this move fits into the TBS brand and why the network should be lauded for making this happen, whether or not it turns out to be a cash cow" (Editor, 2010, p. 26). It is interesting to note the open skepticism here about how much revenue Conan would be able to bring to TBS. As discussed earlier, while his initial ratings at TBS were remarkably high, by 2011, he settled into bringing in numbers comparable to his predecessor. Yet these were much younger viewers, and therefore, much more valuable. A second article in the same issue shared that doubt about advertising revenue, but agreed that whether he brought added revenue to TBS was "potentially irrelevant if you factor in the upside for the TBS brand" (Grossman, 2010, p. 9). Finally, a third *B&C* author pointed out that his ability to boost the TBS brand would "strengthen TBS as a comedy destination [and] also is good for syndicators" who might want to sell a future sitcom to the network (Albiniak, 2010, p. 12). Strengthening the TBS brand is, I argue, where Conan's value to the network truly lies and was a key motivation for Turner execs' desire to secure a deal with him. This theory was confirmed by my interview with a mid-level Turner executive whom I spoke with after Conan's move to TBS was announced, but before the program first aired:

> I mean, Conan's TBS move underscores the importance of a strong brand, strong branding in today's media environment. Even if he isn't a huge ratings draw, and to be clear, Conan could draw a much smaller audience on TBS than he ever even did on NBC, and he'd be still be considered a smashing success. Conan is worth his weight in gold [laughs] because, you know, he will help, he'll solidify TBS as a leading comedy brand, a major brand that attracts a young, diverse audience with Madison Avenue. (Personal Communication, May 7, 2010)

It is important to note that the executive referred to Conan's ability to draw an audience that is young and diverse, which was also a stated goal of bringing George Lopez's late night talk show to TBS. His uncertainty about the ratings Conan would bring in echoes the doubt of the industry critics mentioned above. Like those experts, he also recognizes that Conan's value is not his potential to bring in high ratings, but his ability to strengthen and build awareness of the TBS brand.

In interviews with the trade press, Turner executives regularly touted his likely impact on branding. Steve Koonin publicized his move by saying, "I think this is a seminal moment for the TBS brand and Conan O'Brien will be the face of that brand" (Umstead, 2010, p. 4). Michael Wright went further when he asserted:

> I think Conan becomes something of a lighthouse with the harbor being TBS. Whether it's the viewer who doesn't know us or the viewer that doesn't know us well, you come to that [show] and you start developing a better sense of what TBS is. (Lafayette, 2010, p. 12)

Conan's key value to TBS was based largely on his ability to boost and increase the network's brand awareness and image, and this, of course, was what executives aim to achieve with any cable network programming. Widercasting is both a branding and programming strategy, and Conan is an excellent example of how inextricably linked the two are. This again highlights the importance of studying branding as a lens through which to better understand the post-network era and demonstrates the need for more scholarship that considers branding when talking about programming decisions and impact.

I want to again stress that while TBS framed Conan's move to cable as a win in the network's battle with broadcast, he has attracted a much more niche audience since the move. This was actually his undoing at NBC – he proved too niche for the 11:35 timeslot and the traditionally older *Tonight Show* (1962-current) audience. The fact that Conan was too niche for broadcast, yet feels broad on cable is an illustration of the small yet significant shift of widercasting. Again, per my interview with the Turner executive, Conan's ability to increase ratings was not why Turner picked his show up, but rather, it was his potential to "achiev[e] psychological parity between broadcast and cable among advertisers" (Personal Communication, May 7, 2010). Although Turner wanted advertisers to view TBS and TNT as having equal footing with the broadcast networks, executives asserted that due to their advantages as cable networks, they were instead superior in many ways. At the 2010 upfront, which heavily promoted Conan to advertisers, Steve Koonin said, "…Turner ha[s] become a hybrid with TBS and TNT combining the reach of broadcast and the branding capabilities of cable." I agree that Conan is a hybrid of the best aspects of both broadcast and cable, and in this way, is able to bring in the ad revenue of broadcast while bolstering the network brand, which is an advantage uniquely available to cable.

2.5. Advertising

In addition to expanding into original series and late night, widercasting also allows Turner to create unique advertising opportunities. This is a key benefit because, of course, the primary goal of any media company is to make money, and Turner is no different. As I've stated previously, attracting even higher, broadcast-level ad rates and new advertisers are two of the main reasons that cable networks have pursued widercasting. As one media buyer who spoke to *Broadcasting & Cable* about Turner's unique advertising deals said, "Everything Turner does is to increase the price of their inventory" (Lafayette, 2011, p. 16). I would argue that statement is an especially apt description of Turner's pursuit of widercasting.

General entertainment cable networks established brands to accomplish the same goal that niche networks, such as MTV and Lifetime, needed to during the multichannel era – to communicate to advertisers the types of viewers the network serves. Before having a clearly defined brand, they couldn't do that, but it was easier to promote a branded network's viewers to advertisers, despite the fact that, such as in the case of TBS and TNT, the programming really didn't change much (particularly when a brand first launched). In fact, as I've discussed, not only did much of the programming stay the same, but original series, like *The Closer* (2005-2012) or *Into the West* (2005), were created to attract the same audience that had already been watching TNT and TBS for years.

In pursuit of this strategy and as evidence of the Time Warner value of innovation, Turner launched "TVinContext" in 2008. This was a unique advertising initiative devised "to put the right commercial in the right place at the right time" (Lafayette, 2011, p. 16). For example, in one scene of *The Closer* (2005-2012), Kyra Sedgwick's character ate a Hershey candy bar, and in the commercial break following that, an ad for Hershey aired right before a bumper announcing Hershey as a sponsor of the show. Turner offers these opportunities for its original series as well as acquisitions, and of course, the network charges a premium for this type of integrated, co-marketing deal. TVinContext was heavily promoted during the 2011 Turner upfront presentation that I attended and in several interviews with executives in trade publications. Linda Yaccarino says this of TVinContext: "[It's] the backbone of media planning or contextual planning for years and years. On average, it delivers at least 25% increased receptivity." (Lafayette, 2011, p. 16). Turner executives saw longevity in the program because it allowed them to work with a seemingly endless amount of advertisers. Having a brand helps the network to attract advertisers, but having a broad brand means that just about any product will fit. Again, the types of programming aired on the networks did not change much before branding when compared to after, and broad programming (along with a broad brand) offered an environment that could easily accommodate a wide variety of products.

The use of Lower Third Ads that became common in the first stage of the post-network era is another example of an opportunity made possible by broad programming and a broad brand.[12] These are ads that appear in the lower third of the television screen while a program airs. For an ad to be so directly linked to a program, the product/service being advertised must be a good fit – and, of course, an increased number of advertisers have potential to fit within a program that targets a broad audience. A cover story in a 2008 issue of *Broadcasting & Cable*

[12] Another term used to describe lower third ads as well as initiatives like Turner's TVinContext is "branded entertainment."

highlighted the value of this strategy to the cable television industry in its title when it referred to the lower third as “the last great battleground for viewer attention” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 12). The logic behind embracing lower third ads is connected to one of the key reasons that widercasting developed: audience fragmentation.

Jak Severson, managing partner with branding agency Madison Road Entertainment, explained the trend thusly, “In the days when the audience is shrinking, you have to grow your business” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 12). As audiences have more viewing choices and utilize technologies like DVRs to skip commercials, lower third ads all but guarantee that an advertisement is viewed by anyone watching the program. While TBS and TNT were not the only networks selling ad spots in the lower third of the TV screen, they were the first to implement it beyond simply including the network logo or “bug” while a program aired. In the 1980s, VH1 was the first network to use bugs as a way to ensure Nielsen viewers weren’t confused into thinking they were watching MTV (Atkinson, 2008). Rogers, Epstein and Reeves (2002) called bugs “the most visible evidence of the importance of branding in TVIII,”[13] and certainly in the post-network era, many cable networks expanded on the trend by running promos for their own programs on screen while another series aired (p. 48). ESPN and CNN have both used a ticker at the bottom of the screen featuring additional information like news updates or scores that could be considered a bug, but TBS and TNT led the way in terms of selling the space as advertising (Atkinson, 2008). By 2008, networks, such as NBC, TBS, TNT, and TruTV, sold ad bugs and lower third ads as value-adds and make-goods to advertisers like Alltel and Target.

[13] TVIII, as characterized by Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves (2002) refers to a period of television history most commonly used by British scholars when discussing American television. They date it from 1995 to the present and call it “the digital era” (p. 46). Though TVIII shares many traits with the post-network era, Lotz’s characterization of the post-network era, of course, signifies a different time frame from about the mid-2000s to today.

Turner's first deal in 2008 to sell lower third ads was as part of a larger advertising package for Nissan and Quiznos, among others, to air lower third ads in the TNT original legal drama *Raising the Bar* (2008-2009) (Atkinson, 2008).

The third example of the advertising opportunities that are made possible by branding is to look at the unique deals that correlated with the launch of the TBS "Very Funny" campaign. Sierra Mist, Nationwide Insurance, and American Express – three very different advertisers – were all sponsors of early promos for the "Very Funny" brand. To help launch the TBS brand in 2004, the network paired up with American Express to produce and showcase webisodes written by and starring Jerry Seinfeld. The webisodes aired on TBS as well as online at the AmEx website and YouTube, and the series title was "The Adventures of Seinfeld and Superman." TBS aired the first webisode as a "long-form ad," which was 4-minutes in length and a first for the network, immediately after episodes of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) during its first week in syndication. During the second week, American Express aired shorter ads that previewed the next webisode in "The Adventures of Seinfeld and Superman" and directed viewers to its website. The collaboration with Jerry Seinfeld is another example of Turner's use of existing acquisitions to brand one of its networks because episodes of Seinfeld aired regularly in syndication on TBS. A similar partnership was made with the soft drink company Sierra Mist, which sponsored a comedy festival to help launch the "Very Funny" brand and aired episodes that promoted its relationship with TBS. In both examples, a product's brand became associated with the TBS brand in a way that benefitted both companies. Implementing such co-marketing deals with premium advertisers as sponsors and partners of the network brand has been a major objective of widercasting and works best with broad, flexible brands, like those adopted by TBS and TNT.

Widercasting developed out of the rise of new media technologies, increased audience fragmentation, and the advantages of the basic cable television model. Turner Broadcasting has effectively used the strategy to defensively manage these post-network era challenges by airing and producing original series, expanding into late night, and positioning its networks for unique advertising deals. Having a flexible, broad brand allows networks like TBS and TNT to move across platforms, rationalize programming choices, and welcome more viewers into the viewing community. Motivated by a desire to increase advertising revenue and subscriber fees, network executives perform branding in contradictory ways to target key industry players and audiences. This discursive process functions differently for basic cable networks than for premium networks, like HBO, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

3 QUALITY TV AND HBO'S COALITION AUDIENCES

Since the late 1990s, quality television has become synonymous with HBO and the HBO brand, with many critics celebrating the "It's Not TV, It's HBO," slogan as evidence that HBO programs are sophisticated and intellectually superior to series on other broadcast and cable networks. In many ways, television critics and TV Studies scholars have used their professional positions as experts to bolster and reinforce the HBO brand, frequently offering support and unabashed praise in their (supposedly) critical work. Yet even with their help, HBO's "we're better than the rest of TV" brand loses some of its truth and relevance now that many of its competitors are making quality dramas as well. Here are just a few examples of the kind of over-the-top acclaim from journalists and critics describing HBO's competition: In 2007, a *USA Today* review said of *Mad Men*, "It's a smart, complex drama that attempts to get through the facades that have always hidden the truth" (Bianco, n.p.). Also in 2007, Maureen Ryan of the *Chicago Tribune* called the series "truly addictive" due to its "moral gray areas, flawed characters, and knotty, intriguing plots that contain digressions we don't mind because the worlds we're watching are so compelling and complete" (n.p.). While in 2011, the *Los Angeles Times* commended *Nip/Tuck* as one that "…validated the network's brand as the go-to place for dramas about flawed antiheroes…" (Fernandez, n.p.). *Forbes* cited *Breaking Bad* that same year by saying it "…takes television to an entirely different level…" (Kain, n.p.).

While it may be easy to assume the above quotes referred to much-admired HBO series instead, they refer to basic cablers AMC and FX. At the close of the multichannel era and into the early 2000s, HBO seemed to have the monopoly on quality television, but it didn't take long for other networks to copy HBO's "quality" model in hopes of replicating the premium channel's success. As I discussed in the previous chapter, producing and airing original series have special value for cable networks in terms of securing high carriage fees from MSOs and establishing network brand identities. By 2011, quality television was ubiquitous on cable networks; this ubiquity ostensibly altered the label as a whole and certainly impacted HBO's programming. In the mid-2000s, at the same time that so many of its competitors copying the HBO quality drama formula, the premium network fell into a bit of a slump period. This slump didn't just happen because of the increased competition (though that was surely a contributing factor). HBO also struggled when hit series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) ended with no suitable replacements in addition to some management changes, all of which I will discuss in a later section. To survive in the face of these challenges, HBO had to redefine itself for the post-network era without losing the power of its well-known and well-revered brand identity. One key point I make throughout this chapter is that the concept of quality television (and therefore, by extension, HBO's "quality" brand, which is inextricably linked with the term) has evolved over time as the medium and television industry changed. This evolution has been a function of industrial, economic and cultural shifts from 2001 to 2011.

Although HBO epitomized the most recent manifestation of quality television, it is necessary to recognize that the term was first used by scholars to examine a body of programs in the 1970s and '80s, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *St. Elsewhere* (1982-1988) and *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), and indeed, "quality" discourses have been deployed since the early days of TV (Boddy, 1992). As Charlotte Brunsdon (1990) has pointed out, the types of programs that qualify as "quality television" has changed drastically over time. For example, Brunsdon notes that in the early days of television, live teleplays, and operas were considered quality, and such programs are rarely, if ever, aired anymore. One key component to early quality programs was that they were considered in "good taste" and not "offensive to public feeling" (qtd. on p. 79). In contrast, critics have praised HBO's programs in part for being "risqué" and even vulgar, featuring many instances of violence, sexual content, and nudity that test the limits of the medium. Pushing the envelope by presenting content seen only in R-rated films has been an easy way for HBO to distinguish its shows from others on television. This strategy is, of course, due to the fact that the FCC does not regulate HBO's programming and the network is not dependent upon advertisers. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the edginess in HBO's programs worked to define quality television and, in turn, differentiate the HBO network brand. However, post-network era challenges required both HBO's content and its brand to shift and change. This chapter begins by examining the meaning of quality television on HBO and specifically the incarnation of quality dramas on HBO. Although the network is well-known for its quality dramas, I point out that there have always been inconsistencies in this approach to branding as it has always aired shows that don't quite fit the label. These contradictions elucidate the cultural and industrial work that goes into constructing and preserving a network brand. However, they also reveal that the HBO quality brand and indeed all network brands a false construct created by meticulous performativity by network executives and a complex process of appealing to both key industry players and audiences. One aspect of that process involved executives concealing their promotional work so that the network brand would appear to be authentic – one of many characteristics of quality TV as defined by scholars.

3.1. HBO's Version of Quality TV

In September 2002, HBO ran a print advertising campaign to promote the fourth season premiere of its signature hit series, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) (Goetzl, 2002). The image featured the major characters of the show with brooding, somber expressions. They were looking in opposite directions, never making eye contact with one another or with the viewer.

The dramatic staging of this promo shot was quite deliberate, and not just because famed photographer Annie Leibowitz was behind the camera. The photo intrigued both fans and critics (many of whom were unabashed, self-proclaimed fans of the show as well), and HBO used the ad to strategically target both groups (Goetzl, 2002; Brownfield, 2002). Knowing how familiar fans and critics were with *The Sopranos*, network executives bet on the show's strong reputation and left its title off the ad – the only text included was the season premiere date – a strategy described by one critic as "the network's air of soft-sell cool" (Brownfield, 2002, n.p.).

What makes HBO's uses of such advertising unique compared to basic cable networks is that HBO execs wield marketing to create a "quality" brand identity that viewers will want to lay claim to because they feel it imbues them with a certain kind of high-level esteem and class. As Santo (2008) says, the "cultural capital" being sold in campaigns like the one by Leibowitz is an "exclusivity promised by HBO…supposedly grants paying viewers membership in a distinct community that clearly ranks above the riffraff who watch the standard broadcast and cable stations" (p. 33). This intent was evident in HBO's executive vice president of marketing Eric Kessler's statement about the campaign: "We wanted a print campaign that reflects the quality of the show." (Editor, 2002, p. 22A) The notion of "quality" is also inherent in the slogan embraced by the network in 1996, "It's Not TV, It's HBO," which suggests that HBO and its programming are superior and, thus, so are its viewers. As Jaramillo (2002) pointed out about HBO in the early 2000s, the network "used its privileged position in pay cable (financially, legally, and demographically) to welcome the use of a very specific brand: 'quality'" (p. 65).

"Quality" is the term HBO is most strongly associated with by both critics and scholars through its own marketing speak. But this language appears just as frequently, if not more, in the work of television critics and scholars. For example, critic John Dempsey (2001) described his opinion of HBO programming in *Variety*, “The shows are hits because of the quality of the writing, acting, and directing, which operate on a level that few series on other networks come close to” (n.p.). Without using the word “quality,” Stephen Holden (1999) of *The New York Times* deemed *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) “the greatest work of American popular culture of the last quarter century” (n.p.) Cynthia Littleton (2010) of *Variety* went farther than discussing specific programming, offering instead wide-ranging thoughts on the network as a whole:

> The brand is gold-plated, the most valuable and venerable in all of television. The corporate culture is renowned for its emphasis on excellence and innovation. The senior managers are the exec equivalent of the 1927 Yankees, a formidable team that has, for the most part, worked together for more than two decades. (p. A2)

Howard Rosenberg, a critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, also used “gold” as a stand-in for quality when he said: “Their stuff is hugely better than anyone else's. They have their clunkers, but most of their stuff is just gold - inventive, bold, and generally well executed,” (Haley, 2002, p. 3A).

Again, critics are not alone in praising HBO’s quality programming. Scholars Jaramillo (2002). Nelson (2007), McCabe and Akass (2007), and Smith (2011b) are among those who have analyzed HBO’s status as quality TV. Robin Nelson (2007) dissected the “scholars as fans” phenomenon in an article appropriately titled: “‘Quality Television’: *The Sopranos* is the Best Television Drama Ever…in my Humble Opinion…” Nelson’s (2007) key argument is that scholars should be more confident in asserting their subjective opinions about television programs because that heightens the important debate over the cultural and political implications of quality television. While McCabe and Akass (2007) discuss how HBO deliberately pursued quality television in its original programming to attract an upscale audience. They also assert that HBO chose to air programming not found on other networks in order to stand out in a crowded competitive marketplace. Not every scholar is as celebratory, and it worth noting that others have been critical of the quality label. For example, Jaramillo (2007) draws attention to the capitalistic impulses of HBO and how its branding perpetuates a hierarchy between quality viewers and their less-sophisticated, lower-class broadcast equivalents.

The above scholarship is useful in thinking through the meanings and consequences of HBO's quality television, my analysis focuses on the nuances and discrepancies behind the network's claims. I also analyze the work behind maintaining the quality TV brand and motivations for doing so in the face of post-network era challenges. As a result, I do not engage in debating whether HBO's association with producing quality programming originated from its marketing department or media critics. The difficulty of differentiating HBO executives' marketing from journalistic discourse (and from scholarship as well) serves as evidence that the network's branding tactics have often been successful.[14] In this chapter, I interrogate this complexity by first questioning the viability of HBO's quality TV claims. I then examine the role that trade journalists have played in bolstering and perpetuating this brand identity. In response to specific economic and cultural changes that impacted the television industry during the post-network era, HBO modified its programming. It did so by aggressively pursuing a similar strategy to Jim Collins' (1992) describes as the reassembling of "coalition audiences," which he used to describe efforts by networks to target multiple niche groups by combining genres. Later in this chapter, I will refine and update his concept slightly, particularly how HBO used it to target a diverse set of subscribers by offering "something for everyone." Although HBO always utilized this approach by airing diverse programs, such as *Sex and the City* (1999-2004), *Real Sex* (1990-2009), *Da Ali G. Show* (2003-2004) and *Hard Knocks* (2001-current), that targeted specific, niche demographics, I argue that this tactic became a key post-network era

[14] Success, in this particular instance, refers to the fact that a vast amount of media coverage and academic scholarship reiterated HBO's marketing. Farther on in the chapter, I will quantify the success of HBO's brand in terms of ratings and revenue.

survival tactic for the pay cabler. It became especially prominent during the 2004-2006 "slump" period, which I will also detail and was initiated by the rise of new cable competitors, the endings of several hit series, and management changes. The coalition audiences strategy continued into the 2010s and proved an efficient means of increasing ancillary revenue for the network, which I will also discuss. Overall, I analyze how HBO was able to utilize its flexible and strong brand, which network executives systematically built and reinforced in expansive and, in fact, deceptive ways from 2001 to 2011, to manage and profit from historical challenges, such as new media technologies and increasing audience fragmentation.

3.2. Questioning the Validity of HBO's Quality TV Brand

When *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) approached its series finale in 2007, journalists took the opportunity to celebrate the show's legacy with lengthy articles on its contribution to television, as well as its role in innovating the industry. One such article, written by renowned TV critic Maureen Ryan, characterized the program as "a benchmark of quality" because it hadn't "just shown us what television is capable of, it show[ed] us what filmed storytelling is capable of" (2007, n.p.). *Broadcasting & Cable* journalist Kathy Haley referred to it as "brilliant television…one of the more recent images of the biggest story to happen in TV in at least a generation" (2002, p. 3A). In 2014, meanwhile, The Museum of the Moving Image promoted a talk by *Sopranos* (1999-2007) showrunner David Chase by crediting the program as "the series that inspired the current renaissance of quality television." Other HBO series similarly lauded as "quality" include *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *Deadwood* (2004-2006; beloved by critics and scholars, but too few HBO subscribers) and *The Wire*, (2002-2008) the latter of which a 2006 *Broadcasting & Cable* cover story dubbed "the best show on TV" and "everything that TV should – and can – be" (Robins, 2006, p. 6). Though by no means not the network's first foray into original programming, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) was the first HBO show to have widespread cultural impact and generate expansive attention from viewers and critics alike.[15]

Significantly, a wide range of other series were airing on HBO during this same time period. These series don't fit as neatly into the "quality TV" mold that network executives and critics used to label the network and its programming. I analyze those inconsistencies because they point to the work that goes into developing a network brand and reveal HBO's strategies and goals. Before I get to that discussion, I provide a thorough survey of the academic engagement with the term "quality television." Jaramillo (2002), summarizing the seminal work by Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi (1984), defined the traits of quality television as including "innovative visual style, the use of film over video, actors with training in improvisational work rather than television, and a high degree of creative freedom" (p. 66). Jaramillo (2002) added authorship, creative freedom, and a cinematic "look" to the list (pp. 66-67). Robert J. Thompson (1997), meanwhile, published a detailed list of twelve characteristics of quality television, which serves as a classification key for the phenomenon. I have condensed the characteristics identified by Thompson (1997) into the list below:

[15] It is important to note here that HBO had a long history with original programming before this point. However, the network had not produced dramas or established its quality TV brand until *The Sopranos*. Series were usually comedies, such as *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998) and *Tracey Takes On* (1996-1999), or children's programs like *Fraggle Rock* (1983-1987).

1. Quality television does something different whether in genre, narrative, or another such vehicle.
2. As Jaramillo (2002) echoed, Thompson (1997) asserted that quality television series have an established auteur at the helm.
3. Quality TV attracts an audience with demographics that appeal to advertisers – affluent, educated, young, etc.
4. Thompson (1997), who wrote before *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) premiered along with the HBO's version of quality television, contended that quality programs face "battles between Art and Commerce, between creative writer-producers, and bottom-line-conscious executives" (p. 14).
5. Quality television casts are ensembles.
6. Serialization of plot and character is a key component.
7. Quality television often involves hybrid genres.
8. Complex writing and storytelling are required.
9. Such programs contain allusions to high and popular culture.
10. Narratives tend to be controversial and edgy.
11. "Quality TV aspires toward 'realism'" (p. 15).
12. Quality television programs garner praise from critics and earn accolades. (p. 13-15)

While shows like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008) certainly exemplify most, if not all, of the various attributes above, I posit that HBO's quality dramas add a couple items to the established inventory: namely, such series have been male-centric and primarily focused on male antihero protagonists. Johnson (2007) has discussed masculinity as a central concern of *The Sopranos* with its portrayal of "the social construction of masculinity as an illusory surface of hardness and self-assurance," out of control violence, "frantic macho behavior," and "exercise[s] of patriarchal power" (p. 282, 284). Donnelly (2012) has defined "anti-heroes" thusly:

> …loveable rogues, force us to forgive their occasional misdeeds or repulsive behavior because they are flawed but inherently loveable. We see ourselves in them—we understand how difficult life can be but we celebrate the humanity of these characters in spite of their immoral behavior. (p. 24)

Malin (2010) argued that there were economic benefits for quality television series to focus on manhood and antiheroes. According to a writer for a former HBO television series called

Spawn (1997-1999), the formula for HBO quality television is indeed designed for financial benefit. He stated:

> [Former HBO C.E.O. Chris Albrecht] wanted the downbeat endings because they would be in such sharp contrast to network fare and therefore have an impact on critics. He wanted the 'backwards' storytelling because…the hope was that the more difficult a show was to understand the more times a viewer would watch it and try to figure everything out." (Weinman, 2006, p. 54)

The advantage of cultivating viewers who want to rewatch episodes is that such fans and dedicated viewers were likely to purchase DVD sets and/or purchase episodes on iTunes. Quality dramas like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) undoubtedly had an enormous and lasting economic impact on HBO. However, series that don't as clearly adhere to the network's formula for quality television also have had significant monetary and cultural benefits. My case study's intervention is historiographic, and it is important to note that the shows that haven't fit as smoothly into the HBO/"quality television" narrative have been, in many ways, forgotten and their industrial role minimized.

Significantly, one of the most profitable series in HBO history,[16] *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), did not fit HBO's approach to quality television as neatly as others. Yet, it is regularly included alongside *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008) in trade pubs and academia and praised as a "cultural benchmark" (Johnson, 2003, p. A4). Marc Berman (2004) at *MediaWeek* lumped it in with *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and called the pair "two of the best shows on television" (p. 38). Critic Tim Goodman (2009), known for his ferociously honest

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[16] An article in Broadcasting and Cable reported that by September 2004, HBO had "nearly recouped the entire production costs of early seasons [of *Sex and the City*] from DVD sales alone." The network was able to recoup its investment in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) via DVD sales as well. *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) DVD sets were among the highest sold and routinely appeared as a best-seller on Amazon. HBO earned $100 million in a four-year syndication deal with Tribune while TBS paid $700,000 per episode. HBO's strategic use of DVD sales and syndication will be discussed later in the chapter.

reviews, described *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) as a "top-tier series" that helped HBO "dominat[e] the market" (n.p.). Such sentiments were echoed by HBO's top brass when then executive vice president of marketing, Courteney Moore, discussed its relationship to the network's slogan: "As the channel continued to churn out cultural touchstones like *Sex and the City*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Six Feet Under*, the slogan 'It's Not TV, It's HBO' became 'a compass.'" (Topcik, 2009, p. 17). *Broadcasting & Cable* framed it as such an influential series that "rival programmers [were] scrambling to emulate the realism that has made shows like *Six Feet Under* and *Sex and the City* hits" (Editor, 2002, p. 6A). Realism, of course, is the 11th characteristic of quality television, as delineated by Thompson (1997).

Despite my assertion that *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) is not quality TV, some scholars have held it up as a shining example, and such work has required great labor on their parts to make the show fit the label. Grochowski (2004) said that its cinematic use of the camera put it under that distinction: "The film camera's relative freedom produces a textually rich series of episodes of 'quality television' that is more cinematic than televisual" (p. 158). In the same edited collection, Bignell (2004) rightly pointed out that situation comedies are often disregarded and not given as much critical or scholarly attention. He asserted, however, that *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) is not a typical comedy and thus worthy of analysis: "But its relatively high production values, lack of a live audience laughter track, and relative frequency of filmed exterior inserts both lend it an aura of 'quality' in relation to other programs in the genre, and connect it with other genres, in particular the drama series" (p. 163). By recognizing how *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) upsets traditional sitcom conventions and elevating it to drama status, the series was now accepted into the quality TV faction. Arthurs (2003) described it as "a quality comedy drama series with high production values" after having, perhaps, similarly followed Bignell's line of reasoning (p. 88). Sayeau (2007) considers the series as "quality" because it touches on progressive politics such as abortion and abstinence. However, she couches this qualification with acknowledgment that few have recognized such treatment as serious: "The fact that it is a comedy about four women who have more sex and more money than 'real women,' as some critics have said, often precludes people from believing it could have any political bearing" (p. 60). In each of the above examples, the scholar made effort to defend the description of the series as quality, almost as if they were stretching it to fit. From my perspective, this indicates the show's outlier status to the quality television mantle.

Sex and the City (1998-2004) does not qualify under the established formula for an HBO quality television program, and this challenges claims about the coherence of the HBO brand. As we have seen, such inconsistencies between network executive trade-speak and reality reveal hidden motivations and the complicated efforts to appeal to both industry leaders and audiences. HBO wanted *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) to fit the quality TV brand because that would serve the network's interests in raising the cultural cache of its status and ideally would lead to increased revenue in terms of subscription fees, DVD sales, and syndication. It is not male-centric, yet rather is almost entirely female-centric with underdeveloped male characters in supporting roles who receive little screen time and only then to fulfill the female characters' narrative purposes. Not only does *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) lack a complete antihero of either gender (though the protagonist is not simple or straightforward), but the program features no violence and its characters do not engage in "repulsive" or "rogue-ish" behavior. Finally, its comedic slant is often heart-warming and positive, completely lacking the downbeat endings the former HBO writer described as necessary. Although there is a long history of maligning media that targets a predominantly female demographic, the series is unlike HBO's quality programs in numerous ways. *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) did not fit the HBO quality brand, but it routinely brought in high ratings and cultivated significant media and public attention to the network brand, along with bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue from DVD sales and syndication deals. The series ended in 2004, yet still appears regularly on one nationally distributed cable network (E!). In addition, it spawned two movies, which brought in a combined domestic box office total of almost $250 million ("All time highest grossing movies worldwide," n.d.).

Sex and the City (1998-2004) is not alone in representing an outlier to HBO's quality TV brand, and other exceptions include the network's *Taxicab Confessions* (1995-2010), *Real Sex* (1990-2009), and *Cathouse: The Series* (2005-2008). Nelson (2007) has noted the presence of such fare on the network's schedule, but dismissed it due to the fact that HBO "made its name [with] up-market and sophisticated" programs (p. 27). Critics rarely have discussed these series or rationalized their exclusion of such series from analyses. When the series have been brought up, many reviewers just haven't mentioned HBO's quality dramas in the same articles. A *New York Times* article described *Taxicab Confessions* (1995-2010) as "part documentary, part reality television, with a healthy dose of peep show," while *TV Week* described *Cathouse: The Series* (2005-2008) as "a half-hour docu-soap set in a Nevada brothel following the lives of sex workers and their encounters with customers" (Aurthur, 2005, n.p.; Hibberd, 2005, p. 6). While not much has been written about these series in the trade press, John Powers (2004) of *TV Week* was one of the few reporters to draw attention to the inconsistency:

> For the past hundred years modern culture has been all about the creative tension between high and low, trash and art. At the moment, nobody milks this tension more neatly than HBO. It can offer both a high-tone production like 'Angels in America,' and a lucrative franchise like 'Real Sex,' a series so nudey and smirky that just watching two minutes make me want to join the nearest monastery. (p. 8)

His comments here are reminiscent of Johnson's (2007) discussion of what Jim Collins termed "high pop." According to Johnson (2007), Collins wrote that "high pop" developed in the 1990s as a mixture between elite culture (or art) and popular culture and "the '*remystification* of the aesthetic' so that the appeal of high pop is 'something other than mere popular culture'" (p. 10). Johnson (2007) claimed that HBO is high pop due to its programming and slogan, "It's Not TV, It's HBO," which devalued television by proclaiming that HBO television is different and better than the low culture traditionally produced by the medium. While Johnson (2007) used HBO's quality drama series, such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), as evidence of the network's brand consistency, I assert that the contradictions between the HBO brand and shows, like *Real Sex* (along with *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Entourage* (2004-2011), *True Blood* (2008-2014), and countless others), reveal the immense cultural and industrial work involved in constructing a network brand. The longevity of shows like *Taxicab Confessions* (1995-2010) and *Real Sex* (1990-2009) demonstrates they have value to the network.

Just as there have been economic benefits to airing *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) despite it being, as I contend, "off-brand," there has been additional revenue and value derived from HBO's sexually-themed programs. Sheila Nevins, HBO's executive vice president of original programming, provided one reason the network has offered such series: "They give viewers access to this sort of programming without having to subscribe to a service that they don't want to have appear on their bill" (Editor, 2002, p. 14A). Her comment calls to mind Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of distinction and his theory that the consumption of cultural goods produces and reinforces class differences, which is certainly at work in both the viewers' desire to conceal their tastes and in the network's attempt to associate with high culture. Although HBO's quality television programs appeal to some segments of the population, other viewers may subscribe to it for additional reasons, and our scholarly obsession with quality television prevents us from seeing the importance of other viewers, other types of programs, and other industrial practices. Indeed, there is a wide range of viewing practices that the quality TV brand fails to encompass or address as well. Some subscribers may enjoy the cachet that the HBO brand gives them, but watch series that don't necessarily fit within that "quality TV" category. Fans of adult programming could use HBO's presence on their cable bill as a cover for their preference for shows with sexual content. These shows certainly have been popular and, according to media analyst Dennis McAlpine, have been "the most requested programs by viewers to HBO's on-demand service" (Dempsey, 2004, p. 10). *Real Sex* (1990-2009) pulled in an average of 1.3 million viewers – the same as *Entourage* (2004-2011). Despite the genre's success on HBO, the network did not promote such series and never released episodes for purchase on DVD. Tom Shales (2005) of *TV Week* noted that critics never even received advance review copies of them even though "after-midnight fare like *Real Sex*…probably lures as many subscribers as does the hoity-toity stuff" (p. 23). In fact, perhaps because it veered so sharply off-brand, HBO didn't even like to talk about *Real Sex* (1990-2009) or *Cathouse* (2005-2008) with critics (Hibberd, 2005, p. 6). Based on such comments and actions, HBO executives and critics choose to ignore the discrepancy between *Real Sex* (1990-2009) and the network's quality TV brand just as much media scholarship has to date.

3.3. HBO's Relationship with the Media

The media have been complicit, I argue, in maintaining the façade of the HBO brand because executives strategically and effectively woo critics to ensure favorable media coverage just as they have been using the quality television brand to hail and grab elite viewers. Network executives understand and value the role that the media plays in promoting HBO series and programming, and thus, strategically target critics and exploit reviews and coverage for branding purposes. As previously established, public relations is related to branding in that it is a tool used by executives to brand television networks. While this is not an unusual approach, I assert the fact that as a pay channel, HBO operates differently than basic cable means that its branding works in different ways as well. The network's corporate structure reflects the unique value of public relations to HBO's branding efforts. An *AdAge* article from 1999 emphasized that HBO's marketing and corporate communications departments work more closely together than their counterparts in rival companies (Ross, 1999, p. 20). I assert that this distinctive organizational strategy is evidence of a larger HBO policy that makes direct targeting of the press a priority and a key component to the pay cabler's approach to branding. The seamless integration of marketing with corporate communications demonstrates HBO's tactical plan to brand the network by using public relations to secure favorable media coverage.

While HBO's use of PR is deliberate and calculated, such efforts have not gone unnoticed by members of the press as Claire Atkinson (2005) of *TV Week* noted:

> The HBO marketing model requires the acclaimed pay TV service to remain above the fray, acquiring its aura of cool by slipping, apparently effortlessly, into popular culture. Nowhere is this more evident than its approach to public relations. The request for an interview for this story took seven months to come to fruition, and even then PR reps made it clear they didn't want the piece to look solicited. (It wasn't.) (p. 31)

HBO head of marketing, Eric Kessler, acknowledged that HBO takes a "selective" approach to "generate a tremendous amount of free publicity and consumer awareness [because] we want people writing about us, talking about us" (Finnigan, 2001, n.p.). Atkinson (2005) goes on to characterize the style as a "soft sell," while exposing that "HBO executives [we]re working tirelessly behind the scenes – luring and lunching the editors and influencers – to maximize interest…" (p. 31) The desire of HBO execs to seem "hands off" – as though any praise heaped on the network or its programming was spontaneous – reveals a key component of their branding strategy. Keeping their efforts at network promotion “behind the scenes” is a deliberate attempt to simulate authenticity. In my interview with Scott Moscatelli, an executive with HBO Regional, he said, “HBO is…something that needs to feel authentic…” (personal communication). HBO’s vice president of advertising and promotions, Zach Enterlin, said the same regarding the network’s advertisements for vampire genre show *True Blood* in *Variety*: “Authenticity is really important and critical to credibility” (Graser, 2009, p. 29). Executives’ desire to “feel authentic” is reflected in HBO’s coordinated interactions with the media and is a central component of their attempts to brand the network via one of the defining characteristics of quality television. According to Thompson (1997), “Quality TV aspires towards realism,” (p. 15). In this case, it is the HBO brand rather than the programming that is, in a sense, aspiring towards realism. As Sarah Banet-Weiser points out, HBO is not alone in its efforts to use authenticity to build relationships between consumers and branding. Significantly, HBO’s claims that its brand is authentic have depended upon help from the media and such efforts target both industry leaders and audiences simultaneously.

One early technique used by HBO executives to court critics and industry press was special events. Members of the media had always been invited to such events and encouraged to attend. Providing reviewers with gourmet food and entertainment had been one way of wooing critics, but HBO also used the lavishness of the festivities to establish its quality and elite brand. The network literally provided critics and guests with an exclusive, special experience while asserting that its programming did exactly that. In addition, executives hoped the parties would secure local and national media coverage on their own while marketing a series and branding the network in the process.

For example, to promote *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), the network hosted parties at bars and nightclubs in various cities across the U.S. where episodes of the series were then screened for guests. Coordinating events to garner media coverage is not an entirely new marketing device, but HBO executives utilized it to brand programs and the network as hip and trendy and to get attention and a seal of approval from just the right media outlets. Richard Plepler, currently HBO's chairman and CEO, was HBO's executive vice-president of corporate communications in the late 1990s and early 2000s and explained the events' strategy:

> In places like Atlanta and Miami, we'd find where the buzz-gathering places were for 20-something women, the hip-hop spots. Then we partnered with the cable operator in that area to get the right hip, hot people to screenings for a few episodes of *Sex and the City* at these places. Then there'd be a little dinner party there. This got us local press and local word of mouth. And it enabled me to call up the *New York Times* and suggest to a reporter that outside of New York the show had a buzz. Then, once we got a front page style piece in the *Times* about that, it encouraged other reporters to write about the show. (Ross, 1999, p. 20)

With great detail, Plepler described here how HBO used public relations as an instrument for branding. Kessler was also quoted in the same article as saying that such efforts were an attempt to brand *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), and by extension, the network as a whole. Because HBO subscribers decide each month whether or not to continue subscribing, he said the branding of the program and the branding of the network were inextricably linked: "So we have to make sure there's a message about the brand within any given promotion for a show" (Ross, 1999, p. 20). HBO's configuration as a pay cable channel gives it some economic advantages, such as getting the majority of its revenue from subscriber fees. Yet despite these benefits, the model also comes with its own set of challenges. As executives repeatedly pointed out in interviews, the fact that viewers make a purchase choice each month regarding whether to keep or cancel their subscriptions to the network does put the network in a position of constantly justifying its worth and value. It is this key difference that makes HBO's approach to branding unique to that of basic cable networks (and, ostensibly, broadcast networks as well), and to have this as a motivating factor also distinguishes how HBO uses tools, such as advertising and public relations.

Because the network does not depend upon advertising revenue, ratings for its shows matter in a vastly different way. Instead of chasing ratings, HBO courts subscribers, and positive media coverage is a very effective way of reaching current and potential viewers. An oft-touted goal of the network is simply to be talked about. Kessler explained: "We need to be part of popular culture. Even if [viewers] are not watching us, we need them to be aware that HBO has hot programming that people are talking about" (Friedman and Linnett, 2000, n.p.). HBO uses the media to boost what Lotz (2007) described as "substantial cultural awareness" and to assert the value of the network, and thus, the value of subscribing, by pursuing coverage that establishes it as something desirable and exclusive (p. 183). As Kessler observes, "Part of [our marketing] is a reinforcement to our subscribers who feel special…like part of the club" (Goetzl, 2002, p. 37). HBO's Quality TV contention that its programming is sophisticated and intellectual works on multiple levels in that both critics and viewers want to associate themselves with those features and the implicit superiority of the network's brand. As a 2004 *TV Week* article explained, "[HBO] has the cachet of PBS, only cool, and this makes it catnip for the media folk who create the national buzz" (Powers, 2004, p. 8). Importantly, this is yet another indication that HBO's promotional campaigns were targeted at the media, if not entirely then at least as much as they were directed at viewers.

The previously mentioned Annie Leibowitz photo of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) cast is one example. A *Broadcasting & Cable* article mentioned that it "generated a flurry of publicity" while *Electronic Media* referenced "the critical analyses" that transpired as critics and viewers attempted to interpret it, looking for clues about the new season of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) it promoted. Critics were more likely than the general public to know who Annie Leibowitz was so this is another sign of the network's attempt to engage the media with its marketing. A celebrated network promo titled "Water Cooler Association of America" strategically highlighted the network's (intentional) status as a producer of what executives frequently referred to as "water cooler shows." The ad was satirical and portrayed a fictional Water Cooler Association of America as thanking HBO for saving it from oblivion by giving people a reason to use and congregate by water coolers. Another way of interpreting the *Sopranos* (1999-2007) ad is to see it as HBO thanking the media for generating buzz and interest in series. I view the ad as accentuating the fact that a major goal for HBO executives has been to use media coverage to attract attention to the network and create the impression that its shows were hip and trendy. Media articles that describe HBO series as being "talked about" authenticate the claim just by simply making it. As Barbara Lippert (2004) explains, "As HBO's shows get more popular and talked-about, the association gains confidence…" (p. 22). This campaign is a perfect example of how HBO marketing targets the media in order to brand the network and promote "water-cooler shows" that, according to *The New York Times*, are "program[s] that make waves and create talk" (Waxman, 2004, n.p.).

No media outlet is more effective at creating talk than *The New York Times*, and its critics are certainly not immune to the charms of quality TV. Brian Lowry (2004) of *Variety* alludes to this when he asserts that "the Sunday Arts & Leisure section [of *The New York Times*] often feels like an HBO newsletter surrounded by movie ads" (p. 22). The Annie Leibowitz-shot ad for *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) was included as a poster insert in *The New York Times* that spread out over eight full pages (Romano, 2004). *The New York Times* is mentioned a few times in discussions about HBO's media strategy along with network executives' deliberate targeting of the newspaper, which is historically known as "the paper of record" due to its national prominence and influence. In fact, the *Times* is the newspaper most closely associated with the characteristics of quality television, and it is perhaps this association along with the paper's status as an opinion-maker that have made it such an important part of any HBO promotional campaign. Just as subscribers didn't want to be associated with the low culture of *Real Sex* (1990-2009), they did want to lay claim to cultural cachet of *The New York Times*. As Lowry (2004) points out, the approach was successful – "And because of the *Times'* agenda-setting influence, other [newspapers] follow suit" (p. 22). The network's public relations efforts correlated with the value association with HBO afforded, and as a result, members of the media rarely drew attention to HBO's failures or inconsistencies. The strength and health of the HBO brand was why this strategy worked until about 2006-2008 when the critics turned on the network. This culminated in what Kelso (2008) suggested was HBO's "slump period," which I argue occurred due to three coinciding factors: 1) More competitive landscape with rival networks copied HBO's formula and began airing their own quality television programming; 2) Programming changes, in particular *The Sopranos* ended its six-season, eight-year run with no programming comparable in terms of popularity and critical reception to fill its shoes; and 3) Management changes when HBO's chairman and chief-executive-officer Chris Albrecht was suddenly forced to resign after being charged with domestic assault and battery.

3.4. HBO's Slump Period

The first network to imitate HBO's formula for quality dramas and focus on male antiheroes was FX when it launched *The Shield* in 2002 (2002-2008), followed by *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010) in 2003, and *Rescue Me* (2004-2011) in 2004. FX executives went so far as to declare the intention "of becoming the HBO of basic cable" (Haley, 2002, p. 4A). By 2007, when AMC's *Mad Men* (2007-2015) debuted, a variety of networks were attempting quality television in the mold developed by HBO. Tait (2008) has referred to this phenomenon as "the HBO-ification of genre," while Nygaard (2013) has called it the "HBO Effect" (p. 50; p. 371). Critic Jamie Weinman (2006) included broadcast shows *Lost* (2004-2010) and *24* (2001-2010) in his discussion of the trend, along with SciFi's *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), of which he joked, "Even the home of *Star Trek* reruns is muscling in on HBO" (p. 54). Weinman continued his analysis of HBO's slump: "All this means HBO is no longer the only place to go for a daring, unconventional show, and may actually be losing that battle to other networks and production companies…[so] Albrecht will need to adjust to the fact that his formula is now mainstream" (p. 54). Asserting that even its slogan needed updating, a 2008 *Broadcasting & Cable* article pointed out that while HBO struggled, other networks were using its model successfully:

> The slogan 'It's not TV, it's HBO' no longer works. These days, even HBO is TV - and a lot of other cable networks offer series that have the sheen and ambition normally associated with HBO. The HBO sheen, where most people thinking of 'quality TV' on cable automatically thought of HBO first, no longer applies. It's a brave new world out there. HBO has made some missteps of late…[while] competitors have made some terrific new series. (Bianculli, p. 21)

While HBO's blueprint for quality dramas became the industry standard, the pay cabler labored to find new hit amidst a series of failures. In 2007, *John From Cincinnati* (2007) had the coveted position to premiere after the *Sopranos* series finale, came via *Deadwood*'s (2004-2006) David Milch, and was touted as "a new signature show for the channel" and "unquestionably the net's biggest bet for the summer" (Carter, 2007, p. C10; Zeitchik, 2007, p. 19). However, after lukewarm reviews, HBO canceled it after just one season. Other shows during the time period that failed to take off include *Lucky Louie* (2006), *Extras* (2005-2007), *The Comeback* (2005), and *Rome* (2005-2007), which cost a reported $100 million for the first season (it only lasted two). These disappointments signaled greater unrest and instability when framed within the context of the conclusion of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and the unexpected departure of HBO helmer Chris Albrecht.

The Sopranos (1999-2007) series finale took place on June 10, 2007 amidst countless articles that celebrated its legacy while lamenting whether HBO would ever find another drama to fill its shoes. About a month before Tony's saga ended, HBO's chairman and chief executive officer, Chris Albrecht, was arrested in Las Vegas for allegedly assaulting his girlfriend after attending an HBO-sponsored boxing match. Albrecht swiftly resigned two days later after the *Los Angeles Times* reported a similar incident occurred in 1991 that the network covered up by giving $400,000 to another woman who claimed Albrecht choked her. While the entire scandal sounded like the plot of an HBO series, HBO employees, industry insiders, and critics bemoaned his exit with such statements as: "Losing *The Sopranos* is like losing a limb. Losing Chris is like losing your heart" (Gordon and Roberts, 2007, n.p.). *Newsweek* Critic Devin Gordon (2007) referred to Albrecht as "HBO's beloved, Midas-like C.E.O." and *Broadcasting & Cable*'s J. Max Robins (2007) wondered if HBO could even call itself "not TV" in his absence and asked, "Wasn't Albrecht the straw that stirred the HBO cocktail?" (p. 60; p. 6).

When Albrecht was promoted to his position in 2002, an article in *Daily Variety* called attention to the uniqueness of his trajectory from the head of programming to network chief: "Nets typically don't promote execs to the chairman's job, but during his 17 years at HBO, Albrecht has shepherded some of the most honored and highest-rated original series, movies, and miniseries in all of television" (Dempsey, 2002, p. 22). Albrecht's promotion can be seen as a sign of the economic, cultural, and structural importance of original programming to HBO. However, I do not attribute HBO's slump to the exit of Albrecht or Tony Soprano, but rather to an increasingly competitive environment and specific challenges of the post-network era, such as audience fragmentation, the growth in online viewing, and the network reaching a plateau whereby it likely had hit a peak in terms of subscriber numbers. In addition, HBO's quality TV brand was obscured without hit programming that reaffirmed it in public discourse. In addition, the network's branding was getting lost in a crowded television landscape as other cable networks usurped its quality dram formula. The rise in viable competitors also led to HBO's recipe for quality dramas becoming more mainstream and less unique, which posed a problem for the pay cabler because it needed to offer something different in order to justify to its subscribers why they should continue to pay for the service. As Kelso (2008) wrote, the pressure on HBO to constantly find "the next big thing" is hardly new:

> The network, in a sense, is *forced* to take risks. If it relies on millions of everyday viewers to relinquish a few extra dollars each month for the opportunity to view programming they cannot get on commercial TV, then HBO simply must continuously distinguish itself from broadcast and basic cable stations if it hopes to remain viable. (p. 49) [emphasis in original]

I contend that the unique pressures, challenges, and threats of the early phase of the post-network era led network executives to experiment with a new programming and branding strategy – one that has not received the publicity and media attention by quality TV discourses. I argue that HBO executives began to strategically target and build a distinctive "coalition audiences" to better position the network for success in a digital media environment.

3.5. Pursuing "Coalition audiences"

Before I begin discussing the concept of "coalition audiences" introduced by Jim Collins in 1992, I will distinguish that theory from widercasting, which I examined in the previous chapter. Collins (1992) asserted that to directly compete with cable's narrowcasting strategy, broadcast programs, such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), targeted multiple demographics by combining genres and incorporating a fluctuation in tonality. While this phenomenon did occur on broadcast networks, it can be differentiated from widercasting, which is a distinct strategy by which basic cable television networks have adjusted their branding and programming across the full spectrum of the network in order to mimic broadcasting's ability to provide general entertainment for the masses. Rather than juxtaposing different generic elements within one program, networks such as TNT and TBS used widercasting to establish mainstream appeal by organizing the network around a universal brand and slate of programs that appealed to a wide range of audience members rather than a select few niche groups. In this chapter, I seek to update Collins' (1992) theory for the post-network era and address how this modernized version applies to HBO's programming and branding strategy after the network's slump period ended.

While HBO has always targeted different segments of the audience with niche programs like *Real Sex* (1990-2009), the network's programming slate post-slump was almost entirely organized around series that appealed to viewers with specialized interests as executives more aggressively pursued a coalition audiences to get out HBO of its mid-2000s decline. During the slump period, more cable networks adopted HBO's formula for quality dramas to the point that it became widespread rather than exclusive to HBO. In response to this threat and other post-network era challenges, such as new media technologies and increasing audience fragmentation, HBO executives were forced to reformulate the network's programming strategy. In spite of the new approach to programming, executives chose to continue to assert the network's successful quality TV brand, which I will address shortly. A comparison of discourses in trade publications pre-slump versus post-slump provides detailed evidence to support this argument about the network's strategic programming changes.

A 2003 *MediaWeek* article discussed how Albrecht described HBO's approach to programming: "The key, [Albrecht] adds, is to appeal to the broadest cross-section of subscribers with the widest array of programming in order to compel them to continue to subscribe, while drawing nonsubscribers who think they're missing out on something" (Frutkin, 2003, n.p.). *Broadcasting & Cable* outlined a similarly expansive conception of the audience in 2004 based upon interviews with HBO executives: "the broad group of upscale 18-to-54-year-olds that HBO craves" (Becker, 2004, p. 14). In a 2007 article analyzing how HBO would compensate for the loss of *The Sopranos*, the *New York Times* quoted Albrecht as boasting about the network's past success with "the breadth of the channel's offering" (Carter, 2007, C10). These quotes establish that prior to *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) series finale, HBO strategically produced shows targeted at a wide, general demographic (with the caveat that an elevated income was necessary due to the extra cost of the service).

In contrast, articles that previewed new HBO series following the *Sopranos'* end reported on the network's departure from traditional quality dramas to "create a range of smaller, sometimes less-expensive series…[because] execs hope that by gathering so many niches of the HBO viewership, the blitzkrieg of programming can collectively replace the David Chase drama" (Zeitchik, 2007, p. 16). Such comments characterized HBO almost as if they greenlit several shows in hopes that in airing them all, at least one or two would stick. Carolyn Strauss, HBO's head of programming, concurred: "We're trying to be craftier about things we can do. That will give us the opportunity to target smaller groups with a broader range of shows." (Zeitchik, 2007, p. 16) With this new programming strategy, the meanings for the terms "broad" and "wide" shifted as they became employed to refer to an increase in the number of shows that appeared on the schedule rather than to say that the network was targeting a wide array of demographics. This change certainly signaled that HBO was altering its programming course as *Variety* explained: "So [HBO] is going wider – and instead of seeking the water cooler, it is going after, perhaps, many smaller water fountains" (Zeitchik, 2007, p. 16). Keeping in mind the popular "Water Cooler Association of America" network promo that HBO produced in 2004, this observation alludes to a particularly significant variation in strategy, and it was one that was reflected in programming as well as advertising.

By the time that *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) ended in 2007, HBO had stopped featuring characters from all its shows in ads. To mark that move into a new tactical direction, the network debuted a new promo, "HBO Voyeur," on Sundays, the night that its flagship series bowed. The Voyeur campaign included an original short film, five minutes in length, which was projected onto the side of a building in Manhattan that featured eight different, interconnected stories as though they were taking place live inside the building's apartments. The stories were not based on or built from any HBO series, but were meant to communicate a similar ambiance and shared themes. *Creativity* described the scenes thusly: "In one loft, a group of friends engaged in a wild strip poker romp, while below, an elderly woman was dying, and across the hall, another lady tried to kill a near-naked man" (Editor, 2007, p. 4). There was also an interactive component to the campaign – viewers were encouraged to visit the HBO website where they could view additional footage from the stories.

Voyeur won an award at the Cannes film festival for advertising, including the *Broadcasting & Cable* Brand Builders Award in 2008. In an article announcing that win, Courteney Monroe, HBO's executive vice president of consumer marketing said this of the campaign:

> We wanted to find a way to communicate the key differentiator for us. We're storytellers. That's what we do. We approach stories differently and with very high-quality standards. So we had to figure out a way to capture that essence. We had to illustrate why, when, and how people access our programming because…it would have been lame to just tell viewers how we tell stories. So we decided to show them, and that is how the HBO Voyeur project became a reality. (Neel, 2008, p. 8A)

In the statement, Monroe repeated HBO's signature brand messaging about the network's "quality" and that it offers viewers something that cannot be found anywhere else, but while those assertions were familiar, the execution of them in the Voyeur campaign were new. Rather than letting its programs represent the brand, as they had in the past, Voyeur was "about reinforcing the essence of the HBO brand," according to Monroe (Paoletta, 2007, p. 16). Whereas HBO once let an image of the stars of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) stand in for the network brand in an ad absent of text, the network's advertising now made no mention of its programming and instead expected the HBO brand to speak for its original series. In addition, the ad featured eight different stories that viewers were meant to follow simultaneously, which signaled HBO's increase in original productions and the aggressive pursuit of a "something for everyone" coalition audiences approach, notably something that continues to this day. The Voyeur campaign is another example of how an examination of network branding can reveal programming strategy and challenge widespread critical and journalistic rhetoric.

HBO's new programming philosophy took shape in 2008 when the network debuted a new series with the soapy, vampire series *True Blood* (2008-2014). This premiere came after it failed to find the success (ratings or critical) that executives desired from quirky shows *John From Cincinnati* (2007) or *Flight of the Conchords* (2007-2009). Although the subject matter of *True Blood* (2008-2014) was a shift for the cabler, the decision was made to market the program as "quality," and therefore, as a match for the network brand, because Alan Ball, creator and showrunner for HBO's quality drama *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), was at the helm. This is important to note as HBO historically turns to markers of quality, such as auteurs, for even "lower" cultural fare. Additionally, Oscar-nominated actress Anna Paquin plays the show's protagonist. Thompson (1997) categorized this characteristic of quality TV as "designer label television" due to its "quality pedigree" by being made by an established quality artist (p. 13).

As in the case of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), many critics wrote about *True Blood* (2008-2014) as though it was "quality," despite the many ways the series contradicted such discourses. A *Broadcasting & Cable* article that reviewed its debut noted the series premiere's cold open adhered to the HBO formula: "In the latest example of what has become a familiar calling card of HBO's original series, the *True Blood* pilot begins with a self-referential bit in which a representative of the 'American Vampire League' appears with Bill Maher on what looks to be his HBO late-night show, *Real Time*" (Topcik, 2008, p. 5). This evokes another item on Thompson's (1997) list: "Quality TV is self-conscious" (p. 15).

Despite the show's obvious discrepancies with HBO's established brand identity, critics and executives used quality television discourse to describe the show; examples of this include calling it "innovative," "quality," "buzzed about," "permeating pop culture," and "full of such rich characters and storylines" (Topcik, 2008; Morabito, 2011; Malcolm, 2010; Albiniak, 2010). At the launch party for *True Blood*'s (2008-2014) second season, president of HBO Entertainment Sue Naegle said: "It's a show about assimilation, and how everyone – black, white, straight, gay, vampire, shapeshifter – is driven by a basic desire to be loved. And fangs. It's also about fangs." (Higgins, 2009, p. 40). That quote, in particular, demonstrates how executives framed the series within the larger rhetorical context of quality television to assert its resonance with the HBO brand, but then playfully highlighted how the new series was different and adopted some of the satire and camp that is emblematic of the show. It also illustrated how *True Blood* (2008-2014) was in tension with HBO's quality brand.

The decision to greenlight the series was likely rooted in the current popularity of the vampire genre and executives' desire to capitalize on the trend. The first *Twilight* movie, based upon the trio of teen vampire romance novels, premiered in 2008 and earned almost $200 million at the box office along with plans by Summit Entertainment to complete the series in three more feature films. In addition, the 2007 Will Smith vampire movie, *I Am Legend*, garnered over $250 million. Regardless of the potential economic benefits, producing a show about vampires, particularly one with a female lead, was a departure from quality HBO dramas of the past. Even when taking into consideration the mainstream appeal of vampires at the time of the show's launch, a genre show clearly targeted viewers with special niche interests – specifically younger viewers who are fans of the vampire genre in particular.

While a previously cited quote from a 2004 *Broadcasting & Cable* article mentioned HBO "craved" the 18-54 demographic, network executives began to speak in 2007 about chasing a younger segment of the audience during promotions for shows like *John From Cincinnati* (2007) and *Flight of the Conchords* (2007-2009). Shortly before his resignation, Chris Albrecht spoke about how the network had reached a plateau with regards to subscribers because the cable and satellite industry also had hit a peak. He admitted there weren't as many new viewers entering the marketplace as there had been in the past. In addition, "The people that are coming into the category are younger people. They're making choices for the first time, and it can't just be their father's choices. So we need to make sure we're not their father's HBO." (Zeitchik, 2007, p. 19). *True Blood* (2008-2014) proved to be an excellent series on which to build that foundation – it routinely brought in high ratings among young adults and attracted male and female viewers in equal measure, which was also a new feat for an HBO series (Kissell, 2010). *Entourage* (2004-2011) also targeted a younger skewing audience, but averaged just half the ratings that *True Blood* (2008-2014) was able to bring in. *Entourage* (2004-2011) had 1.3 million viewers in 2005 compared to the 4.3 million *Blood* (2008-2014) garnered for its second season premiere, and that number jumped to 12.6 million when DVD and VOD numbers were factored in (Jones, 2008; Flint, 2010; Kissell, 2010). Though, as noted, ratings only tell part of the story for HBO, *True Blood* (2008-2014) notably became the highest-rated series for HBO since the series finale of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), and even in an age of increased audience fragmentation, shattered the gangster drama's records. The high ratings and the veritable strength of the HBO brand, which had been built up and bolstered over many years by this point, led to a complete disregard by critics of the fact that *True Blood* (2008-2014) didn't adhere to the network's quality TV identity. For the same reasons that Turner pursued widercasting, HBO's programming shift reflected the importance of having a strong cable network brand that is flexible enough for executives to stretch it to justify any programming decision. It is also further evidence of how the media works to maintain and reinforce the HBO brand as "quality."

HBO execs saw the ratings success of *True Blood* (2008-2014) and greenlit another, more expensive, genre show in 2011 – *Game of Thrones* (2011-current). The marketing strategy was to position the series as the televisual counterpart for the lucrative blockbuster movie triology, *Lord of the Rings* (uncoincidentally also a Time Warner property), which was popular with mainstream audiences. *Game of Thrones* (2011-current) provides another example of HBO's "stretch-to-fit" brand:

> After drawing a broad audience and critical acclaim with vampires, HBO is now pushing the fantasy envelope even further…*Thrones'* will be one of the costliest series in HBO's history, and the net is looking to lure both fanboys, who have been salivating about the thought of a TV adaptation, and a broader audience of the sort that helped transform '*Lord of the Rings*' franchise into a worldwide phenomenon. (Levine, 2010, p. 1, 16)

I agree with the contention that HBO executives produced a niche-oriented series with the hope that it would have crossover appeal, but I contend that this strategy is a significant shift for the network. *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) often garnered comparisons to *The Godfather* and the larger mobster-movie genre. However, executives did not attempt to brand the series via its relationship to this niche, but instead targeted a broad audience from the beginning. Although *Lord of the Rings* is an example of a fantasy movie that achieved mainstream Hollywood success, the fantasy genre itself is still denigrated and relegated to cult status, especially on television, as evidenced by the reference to "fanboys." Hills (2007) described fans of cult television as encompassing a "niche" and referred to attempts by mainstream networks to target groups, such as HBO attempting to associate *Game of Thrones* (2011-current) with *Lord of the Rings*, as "cult othering." HBO's adoption of this strategy is evident in media coverage promoting the series premiere.

Notably, the star of *Game*'s (2011-current) first season, Sean Bean, also appeared in *Lord of the Rings* and compared the two in interviews. He noted that the series was more explicit in terms of sexual and violent content – longstanding hallmarks of HBO series, in particular its quality dramas. An article in trade publication *The Hollywood Reporter* observed that the author of the *Game of Thrones* (2011-current) books had "been called the American Tolkien," a reference to the *Lord of the Rings* writer, and while the article doesn't mention who had called him that, a safe bet for the answer would be an HBO executive (Staff, 2011, n.p.). However, as previously discussed, the media are complicit in supporting HBO's branding so it's likely that many such comparisons originated from critics' attempts to reconcile the fantasy series with HBO's quality drama modus operandi. A reviewer for *The Atlantic* went so far as to say that "HBO's *Game of Thrones* probably owes its existence to Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*…" (Meslow, 2012, n.p.). Other instances of the comparison can be directly attributed to HBO, as the show's executive producer/writer David Benioff referred to it as "*The Sopranos* meets Middle Earth" ('Middle Earth' is the setting for *Lord of the Rings*) (Michals, 2011, n.p.). It is interesting to note that this interview was with the *Wall Street Journal*, a publication associated with successful business executives, so Benioff's reference to *Lord of the Rings* is fitting when one considers the stereotypical connection between the fantasy genre and "nerd culture."

While many efforts were made to associate the series directly with the fantasy genre, other seemingly contradictory attempts were made to categorize it within the HBO quality drama tradition. In a 2011 interview with Benioff (this time in a mainstream newspaper that reaches a variety of demographics), he linked his series with *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008), both of which are traditional HBO "quality dramas" (Owen, 2011). Sue Naegle, head of HBO Entertainment, also compared the series to *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) when she told *Broadcasting & Cable* that it was "really a show about characters and that the family drama/conflict makes it relatable in the same way *The Sopranos* was" (Morabito, 2011, p. 32). Without directing citing a previous HBO hit, co-programming chief, Richard Plepler, also attempted to expand *GoT* (2011-current) beyond the science fiction and fantasy genres by making broader comparisons: "While it is a different genre, the storytelling piece, meaning the themes that it takes up - power and strife and people vying for their piece of the crown, metaphorically - those are themes that have been all over the network for years" (Levine, 2010, p. A5). Michael Lombardo, Plepler's counterpart, defended the show and said it "transcends the [fantasy] genre" so HBO picked it up because it had "such interesting and complex characters that we were excited by the drama, not the genre" (ibid.). It is important to recognize the fancy footwork undertaken by network executives to both link the series to geek culture and to HBO's quality TV lineage.

The branding strategy evident from the interviews promoting *Game of Thrones* (2011-current) is that HBO execs appropriated the discourse surrounding quality dramas in a strategic endeavor to distance the series from the fantasy genre enough not to alienate viewers – yet simultaneously made comparisons to *Lord of the Rings* to ensure "fanboys" (and girls) felt welcome. This kind of balancing act was not unfamiliar at HBO, which made sure to offer programming new and different enough to attract new subscribers while also producing series that were sufficiently familiar to keep the network's existing viewers happy. *Game of Thrones* (2011-current) is an excellent case study of how HBO crafted different appeals to appease current subscribers and attract new ones. As the earlier *Daily Variety* quote suggested, by producing *Game* (2011-current), HBO executives attempted to court fans of science fiction, who were likely not current subscribers, and fans of quality television, whom it can be assumed did receive the service. This is an interesting collapse of taste culture distinctions previously cultivated by HBO. It is also indicative of the coalition audiences strategy, which provided the network with economic benefits such as more opportunity for ancillary revenue.

3.6. HBO's Ancillary Revenue

HBO hit 27 million U.S. subscribers by 2004, but after a growth rate of about one million per year for several consecutive years, the network reached market penetration (Higgins and Romano, 2004). While this is one reason for its new approach to programming, it also meant that HBO needed to find additional sources of revenue to continue growing in the post-network era. The coalition audiences programming philosophy afforded the network an ability to earn ancillary revenue from three main sources: 1) DVDs, 2) merchandising, and 3) licensing syndication efforts.

A 2002 *Daily Variety* article noted that the "DVD format [was] a perfect fit for the fanatics" and that seasons of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) routinely were bestsellers at Amazon.com and Wal-Mart, among others (Levine, 2002, p. A18)). In fact, DVD sales for *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) were so lucrative that they helped the network recoup production costs by 2004. HBO sold *Sopranos* (1999-2007) boxed sets for $99.98, which brought in an increase in revenue and another avenue with which to target nonsubscribers as that group made up about half of those who purchased the DVDs. Each set also featured a trailer previewing the next season of the series in hopes that it would persuade nonsubscribers to sign up for the service so they could watch the storylines progress in real time. Aside from the revenue generated, the goal of selling DVDs (and merchandise, which I will discuss shortly) was to extend the brand and "to create a raft of interrelated products, which then work in aggregate to drive further consumer awareness of the media brand" – an especially important strategy with which to thwart post-network era challenges, such as audience fragmentation and increased competition (Murray, 2005, p. 417). By 2005, network executives developed an official DVD release strategy towards this purpose:

> What a DVD release can do, however, is serve as an effective cross-promotional vehicle. Television and print ads promoting the DVD prepare viewers for the upcoming show, and the DVDs give newcomers a chance to catch up on current story lines. And the new episodes on HBO drive DVD sales of the newly available season. (Hibberd, 2005, n.p.)

The approach clearly worked – by 2006, DVD sales made up 20% of the network's revenue (Dempsey, 2006). Although fewer people bought DVDs in the second phase of the post-network era, fans of fantasy still did, which was another motive for HBO to shift the programming slate to include genre shows. The first season of *True Blood* (2008-2014) sold more DVDs than any other TV series in 2009 (Levine, 2010). A 2010 approximation of the total revenue brought in by the sale of *True Blood* (2008-2014) season one and two DVD sets estimated the profits at $100 million (Wallenstein, 2010). In 2011, *Variety* editor Karen Idelson noted the season three DVD set for *True Blood* (2008-2014) debuted in the number one spot on two major indexes, which was a strong enough performance to pull the sets for seasons one and two back into the top ten (Idelson, 2011).

Although the network previously experimented with selling specialty products like a *Sopranos* (1999-2007) cookbook and line of ties, fantasy fans helped increase HBO's profits with an enthusiasm for purchasing *True Blood* (2008-2014) merchandise. On the official website, the network sold "a variety of T-shirts and trinkets, branded with the show's logo" along with "the Tru Blood Beverage, based on the drink served in episodes of the show" (Idelson, 2011, p. 11). Those items sold so well that HBO partnered with major retail brands to sell themed products such as high-end headphones, Sephora make-up, and designer handbags. Marketing expert Michael Schrager explained how HBO executives selected which companies to partner with on the promotion:

> It's no accident that TB merchandise has been placed with upscale, non-mainstream brands that don't show up in the local Wal-Mart. This is a show that's got a potentially high-disposable income audience watching, and it's a show that pushes some boundaries too. Some people really like being associated with that kind of program, and they'll spend the money on big-ticket items… (ibid.)

Of course, the partnerships with luxury products were another attempt to assert *True Blood*'s (2008-2014) connection with HBO's quality brand. This direct targeting of a "quality demographic" is problematic, as Jaramillo (2002) discussed. Likewise, Corner (1998) framed the categorization of quality television within notions about social inequality and "….the unequal distribution of the cultural dispositions and competences by which cultural goodness can be accessed, appreciated and 'used'" (p. 137). The selling of *True Blood* (2008-2014) purses at a pricetag of $695 is the physical embodiment of all that a "quality" brand encompasses, but regardless of the moral complexities, merchandise sales was an additional way for HBO to boost profits and brand equity.

The third revenue opportunity that HBO pursued was syndication, but the network faced a number of challenges and setbacks on this front. *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) was the first HBO-owned series sold in syndication and easily its most successful. Before the sale, the trade publications made brief mentions of the fact that there were concerns from interested parties that the episodes' content would be diluted once they were edited for basic cable. To persuade buyers that the product was still entertaining, HBO put together a cleaned-up version that executives could show to prospective companies, and in 2003, the network brokered a deal with the Tribune station group and sister-net TBS for a total of $100 million (Dempsey, 2003). Two years later, A&E paid a record-setting price for the syndication rights to *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) that was estimated at $195 million, and in 2006, Bravo bought *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) episodes for $15 million (Martin and Dempsey, 2005; Becker, 2006). Selling its shows in syndication seemed to be an extremely lucrative option for HBO, but both *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) garnered disappointing ratings for the basic cable networks. As a result of this failure (and others), HBO abandoned its focus on domestic syndication for a time. The network instead pursued selling foreign rights and executives turned their focus to developing a new media distribution strategy that would ensure the network's continued success in the post-network era and beyond.

In this chapter, I have questioned HBO's quality television brand and analyzed the role of trade media in establishing and reinforcing network branding, which highlights the fact that brands are often more performative than accurate. I also showed how HBO used coalition audiences and a strong, flexible brand to profit in the post-network era. The inconsistencies between HBO's quality brand and much of its programming point to the complexities of the branding process. HBO's approach to branding differs from Turner in key ways due to the differences in their economic models. One such way is that HBO has courted the media – both trade and mainstream – in more overt ways than TBS or TNT because critics help sell the pay cabler's cultural cachet to audiences and industry leaders alike. Contrasting uses of the TV Everywhere model further distinguishes premium networks from basic cable networks, and I will address how and why these deviations occur in the next chapter.

4 TV NOT QUITE EVERYWHERE: REFRAMING LINEAR BRANDS FOR CONVERGENT PLATFORMS

In March 2014, the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences – the organization that awards the prestigious Emmys in recognition of outstanding television – changed its name to simply The Television Academy. This was a historic moment for a group that has been in existence for 73 years, but it was very nearly even more significant because the Academy almost dropped "Television" from its title altogether. The mere fact that the single organization that bestows awards for excellence in the television industry debated on whether to remove the word from its name shows the uncertain and tenuous state the medium faces today.

As we've seen with Turner and HBO, both pursued brands that allowed the networks the flexibility necessary for moving across platforms. HBO faced more competitors copying its signature quality drama formula and, thus, broadened its programming in an effort to stand out in an overcrowded marketplace. Turner also experimented with pushing boundaries in terms of focusing its programming strategy on airing original series and expanding into new areas, such as their move into late night. As they faced new financial challenges due to changes in the emerging post-network era, HBO, TBS, and TNT found new ways to make money as HBO pursued ancillary revenue and Turner created unique avenues for lucrative advertising deals. Threats to the traditional cable model came in the face of non-linear competitors like Netflix and Hulu. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to "linear television" and "non-linear television" so I would like to begin by clarifying those terms. Jostein Gripsrud (2010) described linear television as "traditional television services" that push content to viewers and non-linear services as platforms where "viewers pull content" (p. 10). Similarly, Amanda Lotz (2007) characterized linear TV as "passive" where viewers simply watch "whatever comes on next or is on" whereas non-linear content is that "in which viewers deliberately select programs" (pp. 59, 234). Thus, rather than categorizing Netflix, Hulu, Roku, etc. as hardware or software, scholars have focused instead of the capabilities of such services and how they upset traditional television viewing. At a time of increased viewer agency, linear television networks give consumers the ability to watch what they want when they want, yet networks like TBS, TNT, and HBO have been strategically adapting in ways that attempt to preserve the traditional cable model. However, I say this with an implicit acknowledgement that the traditional cable system will eventually be forced to change and adapt to the demands of the post-network era. I posit Turner and HBO executives are aware, and have been, of the current model's limited shelf-life, and the strategies I analyze in this chapter are techniques used to hold off that shift and to maintain as much of the traditional model as possible. While no one can predict what the television landscape will look like in the future (and that is not my aim here or with this project), it is safe to assume the cable industry will be different than its present iteration. The defensive moves used by Turner and HBO highlight the instability in the current understanding of television and the unpredictability of its evolution.

Considering rising competitors in the online environment like Netflix, who moved from distribution into original program provider in 2013, and the increasing variety of screens available from which to watch "television" that include mobile phones and tablets thinner and smaller than a sheet of paper, it's no wonder why even the term "television" itself is unstable. Even leaders in the industry have difficulty defining and characterizing television in the post-network era. At the 2012 CTAM conference, Linda Schupack, EVP of marketing for AMC, said, "Television, to us, is epic storytelling on a screen." Joe Ambeault of Verizon, meanwhile, offered up this description: "TV is an application, and applications ride on all sorts of devices."

This sentiment was echoed when HBO dropped the "It's Not TV," from its famous "It's Not TV, It's HBO," slogan in 2010 without a major announcement or marketing campaign. In my interview with HBO exec Scott Moscatelli, he explained the decision: "It's *not* TV anymore, it's content." These broad characterizations of television demonstrate the uncertainty and volatility of the post-network era. You can also see from the above comments that each executive's definition for television varies according to their own self-interests. This occurs because industry discourse, as I've established in previous chapters, is as much about promoting a media company to key players as it is to the audience.

Industry insiders aren't the only ones grappling with the changing meaning of television today. Amanda Lotz (2003) describes the confusion thusly: "Although the 'hardware' of television technology has changed slightly, its 'applications' have multiplied extensively, changing audiences' perception of 'television' and necessitating address of the most basic question, 'what is television?'" (p. 4). Spigel (2004) acknowledges that television is "mutated in form" yet has been and will continue to be "a central mode of information and entertainment" (p. 1). Bennett and Strange (2011) use the term "digital television" and characterize it broadly as "texts, aesthetics, ideology, culture, audiences and production practices" (p. 13). With my project, I assert that branding – conceptually and in practice – has been used by cable networks as a means of reinforcing what 'television' means in the post-network era in some ways and challenging it in others, all of which I discuss in this chapter.

Whatever 'television' comes to stand for in the future, sister networks like TBS, TNT, and HBO want to be sure they stake out their place in that emerging landscape. For this reason, they banded together to lead the industry via a new economic model designed for television in the post-network era and beyond – TV Everywhere. In 2009, Turner executives began touting a new initiative called TV Everywhere, which is an authenticated service that makes select television content available to cable subscribers.[17] In 2010, HBO launched its own TV Everywhere service called HBO Go, which was a revamped version of its website that offered subscribers access to HBO original programming and exclusive movies, and two years later, HBO introduced the HBO Go mobile application that allowed subscribers to view hundreds of titles on tablets and other portable streaming devices. However, the TV Everywhere model as I see it is not accurately named, and as the chapter title suggests, I see it operating as "TV Not Quite Everywhere."

For example, Turner has allowed viewers to only access a limited number of episodes on its website. This is due to licensing restrictions and because their ultimate goal is to drive traffic back to the television set. On the other hand, HBO struggled at first to secure deals with cable providers for its HBO Go service, such as Time Warner Cable, one of the country's largest multi-system operators, who took two years to sign on (O'Neal, 2011). Cable operators have restrictions on which devices subscribers can use to access HBO Go, and as of 2015, every streaming device is still not yet available for most viewers. Both Turner and HBO have trouble with international licensing so TV Everywhere is certainly not everywhere worldwide. Lastly, as both require users to authenticate their cable subscription, their content is only viewable to cable subscribers.[18] These are some of the limitations to TV Everywhere, but there are significant advantages, of course, to the model, which I will expand on throughout this chapter. In paving

[17] In 2010, Cynthia Littleton at *Variety* described TV Everywhere as: "a concept…designed to make pay and basic cable programming available on-demand via a range of devices, so long as a user is a subscriber to a cable, satellite or telco-TV service" (p. 1). The TV Everywhere model includes video-on-demand viewing via a cable box, online viewing, and mobile viewing, and when I refer to TV Everywhere throughout this chapter, I will be speaking about all these modes of consuming television.

[18] In April 2015, HBO offered non-cable subscribers the ability to purchase a standalone HBO service called HBO Now for $15 per month. This initiative will be addressed in the next chapter.

their way for TV Everywhere, Turner and HBO spent the first phase of the post-network era defining, articulating, and strengthening clear network brands that would ensure future success in a radically different television landscape.

In a foundational work on television branding, Todreas (1999) argued that firmly established brands better position television networks to succeed in the digital space by allowing their content to easily move across platforms and be noticed by viewers in the midst of media clutter. In a media environment overrun with available content, he acknowledged it would be difficult for audiences to navigate television so "a handful of digital brands will emerge as the principal means to organize content for the information weary consumer" (p. 99). He predicted television networks, due to the familiarity of their brands and the immense resources at their disposal, were best suited to serve as "that trusted place where users can go to get a particular type of entertainment or information" (p. 178). For this reason, I believe it is necessary that we consider how and why established linear networks are negotiating post-network era challenges to position themselves as leaders of the new digital environment. Building off Todreas's (1999) theories, I assert that branding is a key tool in this process. While both Turner and HBO support the TV Everywhere model and are both within the same media conglomerate, the networks' unique approaches to the internet occur for diverse motivations and purposes, as a result of the differences in their economic models and structures, as Perren (2010) has acknowledged. I will examine each of these differences and how they play out in programming and branding strategies, but first would like to further characterize the state of television on the internet as I see it in the post-network era.

4.1. The Post-Network Era and Non-linear Television

Of all the new dangers facing the television industry in the post-network era, the rise of digitalization, meaning the ability to copy and circulate content without a loss of quality, has been the most threatening. Lapan (2009) identified the five major challenges it introduced: "1) piracy, 2) loss of distribution control, 3) loss of content control, 4) fragmented audiences, and 5) declining advertising revenue" (p. 366). Though the conglomerate is not the only media company experimenting with providing access to content online, the strategy Time Warner championed during 2001 to 2011 to combat these issues was the TV Everywhere model, which includes HBO Go. Lapan (2009) recommended that in order to address the challenges posed by the internet networks share content on their websites – 1) as soon as it becomes available to thwart digital piracy efforts, 2) as much content as possible to gain control over distribution, 3) on interactive platforms that encourage viewer engagement and usage, and 4) using a model that provides opportunities to increase advertising revenue. The last item listed would not apply to HBO, of course, but pertains to TBS and TNT, especially at a time when consumers have divided their time between viewing content online and on television. For these reasons, Lapan (2009) assessed that the TV Everywhere model (though he does not use that term), if adopted and championed by the industry as a whole (including cable and satellite operators), was a "viable" and "promising" mechanism to combat the difficulty and uncertainty of the post-network era (p. 378).

Audience fragmentation looms as the greatest threat on Lapan's (2009) list of challenges to the TV industry brought by the internet, and while it is not a new problem to the industry, it is a persistent one that has been increasingly difficult to surmount. Competition has always been an issue networks have had to confront, but the reason it is so different and so much stronger in the online space is due to the endless sea of niche content available to any individual with streaming capability, including so many new disruptive well-funded players. In his work on what he has termed "The Long Tail," Chris Anderson (2004) described the new digital entertainment economy as comprised of "millions of niche markets" featuring content with "unlimited selection" (n.p.). The long tail includes vast content libraries, such as those owned (or licensed by) TBS, TNT, and HBO, a backlog of older movies and TV shows available on Amazon or Netflix, along with user generated content like original web series or YouTube videos. Moving viewers through the long tail is a major goal for cable networks as the shape of television continues to evolve non-linearly. For example, HBO wants its subscribers to spend a majority of their time watching its content on HBO Go and to find so much value in its offerings that they cancel their Netflix subscription or at the very least to see the merit in continuing their relationship with HBO.

In much the same way that basic cable networks first used narrowcasting to target niche demographics not served by mainstream fare on broadcast, online channels, distributors, and content creators have embraced and are replicating key characteristics of the multichannel transition era model. Just as cable networks initially copied certain aspects of broadcast for economic and cultural reasons (Mullen, 2003), the current iteration of "internet television" is borrowing from the early days of cable, yet making modifications for the post-network era. To compete with the narrowcasting taking place online, cable networks have adapted and reformulated their own strategies used in the multichannel era for the digital age, such as widercasting, which was discussed in chapter two. I argue that cable networks have used such strategies to succeed in the post-network era TV industry while also using multichannel era tactics to compete in an online environment that, despite being new and advanced, functions in many ways like the multichannel era of the 1980s and 1990s. Using case studies of TBS, TNT, and HBO during the second phase of the post-network era, I will illustrate how cable networks today use similar strategies and tactics in the digital environment as those employed during the multichannel transition era and will provide examples and more details about this strategy in a later section. First, I will contextualize the differences between how basic cable networks and premium cable networks have approached the problem of non-linear television and how they have employed TV Everywhere as a defensive strategy based upon their unique economic structural differences and disparate objectives.

4.2. Different Approaches for Different Types of Cable Networks

In addition to the other benefits of branding examined in previous chapters, one key advantage that holds true for all types of television networks is that a strong brand can easily move across platforms.[19] While Turner networks and HBO share a common goal in developing the ability to succeed in the online media environment, the peculiarities of the networks' economic models and programming strategies necessitate that there exist differences. Each depend upon multi-system operators so both have embraced the TV Everywhere authentication model, but use it in unique ways to support the network's distinct financial goals. The key difference that influences the diverse approaches is in the publics they prioritize where Turner's main concern has been keeping advertisers happy and HBO's motivation has been increasing and maintaining its subscriber base. Turner, which coined the term, has used TV Everywhere to increase advertising revenue and preserve as much of the traditional cable model as possible.

[19] When I refer to "all types of television networks," I am including basic cable networks (such as TNT and TBS), premium cable networks (like HBO), as well as broadcast networks. A strong brand is one that boasts a large amount of brand awareness amongst the television viewing population, a firmly established brand identity, and high brand equity. Previous chapters detailed how TNT, TBS, and HBO built strong network brands, and this chapter will analyze how that benefits the media companies in the online space.

HBO also wants to maintain the old model, but inconsistencies in the way that HBO executives communicated in trade publications versus comments made to me in interviews reveal that HBO's discourse about preserving the traditional cable model is likely more performative than genuine.[20] At any rate, HBO has been focusing more aggressively than other networks on paving out a path to future non-linear success – no matter the shape or form the television industry takes. As a result, HBO has used its HBO Go service to attract younger subscribers and fight viewer churn. Executives assert that HBO Go is not a threat to traditional cable so they can maintain the strength of their relationship with operators who they rely on to promote subscriptions.

4.2.1. Turner Broadcasting – TNT and TBS

Though they also rely on subscriber fees, for basic cable networks, such as TNT and TBS, viewers are the product that is sold, and advertisers are the target customers. Turner executives want to keep advertisers happy in order to maintain and/or increase ad revenue so their approach to non-linear television has been to ensure there is a mechanism with which to sell ad space and collect ratings data. Turner also depends financially on multi-system operators, such as Comcast, which is why executives have prioritized the development of an industry-wide authentication system to verify that only cable subscribers have access to online content. To preserve as much of the traditional cable subscription model for as long as possible, Turner focused on the potential for TV Everywhere to 1) increase advertising revenue and 2) fight off competitors/threats to the existing system. Turner executives' focus on the TV Everywhere model is part of their attempt to navigate the evolving and uncertain media landscape.

[20] I will provide an example of this along with more analysis in a later section.

In a 2010 interview with *Broadcasting & Cable* to promote Turner Broadcasting's fortieth anniversary, Turner CEO Phil Kent spoke about the television industry at the current moment and in the future. He had this to say about TV Everywhere:

> We're trying to address two issues: how to get to the consumer the content, what they want, where they want it, how they want it, but still hold up the underpinnings of the business…and the best way to do that, I think…is authenticate that the consumer is paying for these channels in some form to someone… (Grego, 2010, p. 11)

It is clear from this statement, and many others like it, that Turner executives viewed authentication as a way to, as Kent put it, "preserve the ecosystem" (p. 11). In a 2007 interview, Jeff Bewkes expressed the sentiment in another way:

> The best way to do that is to keep the advertising support in the networks that are advertising-supported. It gets you the widest possible audience, it maintains all of the economic support, and it continues to strengthen the networks as platforms to introduce programming. (Robichaux, 2007, p. 14)

In much the same way that the broadcast networks fought off the expansion of the cable industry in the 1970s, the post-network era television industry is pushing back against online content creators and distributors, predominantly Netflix and Hulu (Mullen, 2003; Parsons & Frieden, 1998). The threat posed by their non-linear competitors is that they take viewers' eyes off Turner's linear networks – and, importantly, the advertising they aired and network branding they promoted. Turner executives further wished to maintain the current cable system, and its place as a leader in it, because the networks relied so heavily on subscriber fees collected by cable operators. Without that additional source of revenue, it would be difficult to manage the high costs Turner pays for programming. While this is all true, another aspect of this discourse about maintaining the old model is that executives used interviews and convention appearances to appear forward thinking to key players even though, in reality, they have been recycling ideas that worked in the past rather than being truly innovative.

Another point to note in Kent's comments above is the mention of giving consumers the content they want, when they want it. This is reminiscent of executives' earlier assertions, discussed in chapter two, that the TBS comedy brand and TNT drama brand were both chosen based on what viewers wanted. In the later 2000s, Turner executives advocating for TNT Everywhere frequently mentioned this refrain in interviews with trade publications. In 2011, David Levy, Turner's then head of sales, distribution, and sports, said: "…we believe if you're paying us, the consumer should be able to get it anywhere on any platform he may want, as long as you authenticate it. I mean, they're paying for it, right?" (Lafayette, 2011, p. 9). Levy's assertion gives the impression that the TV Everywhere model is in the best interest of cable subscribers, but to believe that would be to ignore the economic reality of the industry and the institutional power dynamics that exist in the relationship between the networks and viewers. Turner is a major television broadcaster within one of the largest and most profitable media conglomerates in the world. Framing its decisions in language that alleges executives are doing subscribers a favor or are looking out for their best interest gives consumers agency and power within an industry where capitalistic imperatives necessarily subjugate consumers to the sidelines as a matter of practice.

In another example of a cable executive alleging that self-serving moves helped consumers, Oprah Winfrey spoke at the 2011 Cable Show as part of her concerted effort to turn a profit from her struggling cable network, OWN, which was less than a year old at the time. Oprah's brand has long been synonymous with her ability to relate to and connect with her fans, so when she talked about building a network around content that brought meaning and purpose to viewers and repeatedly stated that her goal was to "serve the viewer," these statements were consistent with her brand identity. However, those comments must taken within the larger context of Winfrey's dependence on the internal audience she was speaking to at The Cable Show, the largest event for the cable industry. While concern for consumers was not as emblematic of the TBS or TNT brands, Turner executives made the same claims and promoted the network brands as having been identified based on consumer demand. Such comments must be questioned as the goal of any strategy implemented by a major media company – whether it is OWN, TNT, or TBS – cannot be extrapolated from the hegemonic structure and capitalistic imperative of the television industry, and thus, the chief motivation behind TV Everywhere is inherently economic. One key to this is advertising, which, of course, also served as a main benefit of widercasting. Widercasting's value becomes more important in the non-linear television model because broad, flexible brands can move more easily across platforms. HBO's strategic pursuit of coalition audiences also had economic benefits in the non-linear model, such as millennials' frequent use of new media and science fiction fans' desire to further engage with the text. These advantages and others will be discussed in the next section.

Just as Turner executives wish to maintain the profit generated by subscriber fees, advertising revenue, of course, is another vital component of the cable model. As Morabito (2011) explained: "…Turner wants to do TV Everywhere with ads so that they are not cannibalizing their viable existing cable business" (p. 11). Along with the objective of selling ad space in the TV Everywhere environment, the statement is another reiteration of Turner's commitment to maintaining the traditional cable system. A benefit to airing ads in the digital space is that it is an additional source of revenue for TNT and TBS, which is especially valuable due to the threat of the substantial audience fragmentation in the post-network era, and often the networks require advertisers to pay more for cross-platform exposure. In chapter three, I discussed how widercasting gave TNT and TBS a greater ability to put together unique advertising deals and partnerships. These deals were enriched by including an online component, and the networks charged a premium to advertisers for marketing across multiple platforms. Turner's sales department bundled advertisements into one package that consisted of live television, VOD, online, and mobile in order to boost income (Winslow, 2010, p. 19). The fact that Turner executives have treated the various modes of viewing similarly is an indication that they recognize the inevitable changes to the structure of the TV industry as the post-network era continues to take shape, but can only act according to their understanding of old models and practices. In the words of one media buyer, "Everything [Turner does] is to increase the price of their inventory," and Turner's ad sales department charging more for advertising on different venues is just another example of the networks' defensive attempts to boost revenue (Lafayette, 2011, p. 16).

A challenge that basic cable networks encountered with the implementation of TV Everywhere was in advertising's intrinsic dependency on ratings data. For TNT and TBS to profit off selling ads in the digital space, executives had to provide viewership information to marketers. Early in the development of video-on-demand technology, Turner Broadcasting was heavily involved in creating a model for advertising placement in VOD and online spaces. Comprised of executives from advertisers, television networks, cable operators, and technology companies, the DiMA Group was formed in 2003 to address the challenges presented by digital advertising. Turner joined a subset of that consortium, IDiA, which stood for Innovation in Digital Advertising and existed from 2003 to 2006. The focus of IDiA was to engage the various factions of the television advertising industry and solve problems, such as technology adoption and system compliance, in order to adapt to the post-network era challenges with coordination and collaboration. One major goal of both DiMA and IDiA, along with other similar organizations, was to persuade and compel Nielsen to include VOD and online viewing when collecting ratings data. All the impacted parties were united in advancing this as a priority because the industry as a whole recognized that money was being left on the table with consumers watching television in these new environments without the ability to monetize that behavior, and as time went on, they also needed to make up for lost viewers to online outlets. As Arthur Orduna of VOD advertising company Canoe Ventures put it at the 2011 Cable Show, without advertisers, networks, and operators coming together to agree on a unified system, digital advertising “is a science project as opposed to a business.” Orduna’s statement revealed the instability, experimentation, and uncertainty that has typified the television industry from 2001 to 2011. Starcom Mediavest executive Tim Hanlon made a similar comment about the volatility of the media landscape: “As TV becomes more consumer controlled, the traditional forms of measurement will not hold up…” (Stump, 2004, p. 30).

The desperation with which industry leaders approach the post-network era is palpable in such disclosures, and that insecurity can also be seen in the rapid changes that took place during this time. Historically, the television industry has progressed rather slowly and executives fought change at every turn, but with technology advancing at the current pace, one unique characteristic of the first phase of the post-network era is how willing to adapt the industry leaders appeared to be. In my research, I found this willingness present in statements made at industry conferences, to trade publications as well as in my own conversations with insiders. The veracity on display in many such comments (evident in body language, facial expressions and inflection as well as language) seems to portray the industry as confronting these challenges and changes eagerly; however, I interpret this as revealing extreme anxiety about the very real consequences that could befall them from the constantly evolving, unpredictable danger posed by the internet. As mentioned earlier, one tactic that cable networks employed to tackle competitors, such as Hulu, was to pressure Nielsen to calculate ratings data from VOD and online viewing – and to conduct those calculations in very particular ways that upheld the linear television model.[21] A requirement for tabulation was that the ads featured on live television must also appear during breaks when that program is viewed online or on VOD. This presented a setback for Hulu and other free ad-supported websites that showed fewer, and different, commercials than those that aired within the live broadcast. Not coincidentally, this condition supported Turner's advertising goals and initiatives, such as the inContext program introduced in 2008 that packaged advertising across platforms and charged higher rates for this ability. Thus, an added benefit to this new form of measurement was that networks could raise the cost to advertisers and, by turn, increase revenue. Turner CEO Phil Kent claimed the additional impressions "could lead to a whole new golden era of television," though I posit his use of the word "golden" likely has more in common with the bricks in Fort Knox than MTM's quality television (Grego, 2010, p. 11).

In addition to the introduction of VOD and need for online ratings data, Turner used TV Everywhere in other ways to fight competitors and other threats. One chief area of concern for executives was "cord cutting," which referred to individuals canceling cable subscriptions and accessing content either illegally via piracy or through online distributors. Principal figures from Turner, Time Warner corporate, and HBO, among others, repeatedly asserted in trade publications and industry conferences that TV Everywhere was the key to ending cord cutting.

[21] Nielsen, it must be pointed out, also had motivation for adherence to the traditional television model, which it had dominated almost monopolistically since the medium's inception. Nielsen, therefore, had a huge economic incentive to develop a mechanism to collect ratings information from alternative methods of viewing so that it could maintain its authority over advertising measurement.

Todd Spangler (2011) at *Multichannel News* characterized the approach as "…giv[ing] cable-TV customers a fat carrot to dissuade them from cutting the cord…" (p. 14). Turner executives argued that giving consumers access to content whenever and wherever they wanted would be an effective retention tool to benefit the industry as a whole. I read this statement as being performative for the sake of maintaining relationships with operators as much as it was a sincere attempt by executives to convince themselves that the sky wasn't falling and cord-cutting was a threat they could mitigate. Another danger to linear television is Netflix because it offers cord cutters a viable alternative and also because there is considerable overlap in programming. Turner and Netflix vie for rights to air the same acquired programs and movies as does HBO whose competition with Netflix will be discussed in the next section.

Speaking at the Citigroup Entertainment, Media and Telecommunications Conference in 2011, Phil Kent asserted that Turner would pay less for programming that was also available on Netflix or would demand exclusivity: "We've been telling our suppliers, the various studios we buy from, that in the future this is going to have a significant impact on what we'll be willing to pay for programming or even bid at all" (Farrell, 2011, p. 20). While cable executives were worried that Netflix would lead to an increase in cord cutting, Kent's comments served to address studios as a public negotiation tactic. The CEO's goals expressed here were to lower the prices Turner paid for content, thereby increasing the media company's bottom-line and putting pressure on studios to grant Turner exclusive streaming rights. With Nielsen including online viewing into ratings data, basic cable networks wanted to make as much content available on their websites as possible because more content means more ad revenue. The hurdle here is securing the rights before the competition does. Industry analyst James McQuivey explained the complex relationships and power dynamics at work in such negotiations:

> The big fight a year ago was that the operators said, 'We want your content to remain competitive.' The media companies said, 'OK, you've got to pay more.' What you really got is a promise from Time Warner that when Netflix is up for renewal then Netflix will have to pay more. (Spangler, 2011, p. 3)

As a new ecosystem evolves for cable television, all the major players are fighting over who will control the shape the new industry takes. Marc Juris, head of TruTV from 2007 to 2013, acknowledged this uncertainty at the 2011 Cable Show: "It's hard to figure out the new business model…it is going to change, but no one knows how." Motivated by a unique set of priorities and distinct economic structure, Turner executives employed various tactics to ensure their networks' place in the future media environment. Branding is certainly a key component in Turner's overall approach and an important tool that executives hope will ensure success for the networks as the post-network era continues to evolve. C.O.O. of Turner Network Sales, Coleman Breland, explained Turner's philosophy about branding in the new television landscape: "It's not about linear networks. It's about how do you take a brand, have it permeate and become valuable across devices and across multiple demographics" (Lafayette, 2011, p. 30) Shortly, I will examine how Turner used its strong linear network brand in the online media space, but now I will discuss how HBO approached internet television in ways unique to its particular industrial structure.

4.2.2. HBO

In contrast to Turner's dual revenue model, HBO's revenue is based on direct payment by subscribers attracted by its content, which includes original programming as well as Hollywood films the network purchased the rights to air. As a result, the priority for HBO is its subscriber base, and while advertisers do not have a substantial role within the HBO financial model, cable operators have been the gatekeepers to HBO subscribers so the relationship with that group has been certainly one HBO executives have attempted to maintain. Joining its Time Warner sibling, HBO also endorsed authentication, which served as the foundation for its innovative web and mobile application HBO Go. Executives promoted HBO Go as a value-add for subscribers and a retention tool with which to fight subscriber "churn" or turnover. It is worth noting, however, that HBO cares less about preserving the traditional cable subscription model because it was better positioned for an a la carte future, especially now with HBO Go, which could be sold directly to subscribers, bypassing MSOs altogether. While publicly HBO executives supported the continuation of the current cable structure, they made small moves – mainly, via HBO Go – that would allow the network to remain profitable in the years to come and led the way in constructing the shape of cable television in an a la carte world. Turner has been more dependent on the old model due to its reliance on broadcast reruns and advertising, but HBO has advantages afforded to it as a premium network that better position it to survive in a non-linear space. As a result, their stance to TV Everywhere has been a bit more proactive than Turner.

In my interview with HBO marketing executive Scott Mocatelli, I asked him what he thought would be the shape of the future television industry. His response was, "As far as how the industry's going to change, I just don't, I don't see it changing, even in the distant future." This statement was especially interesting in the context of our larger conversation with regards to the fact that we had just discussed business strategies, including HBO Go, the use of second screens, and the influx of content available for streaming – all were indisputably major changes and innovations that affected how the larger TV industry functions at various levels. I would argue this inconsistency was purposeful and that it reveals a great deal about the power dynamics within HBO's industrial structure and the relationship between HBO and cable providers. The reason that HBO executives emphatically defended the traditional cable model in the early 2010s is that premium channels have depended heavily on operators who promote their service to subscribers. When HBO promotes a new series or new season of a returning show, they coordinate efforts with operators across the country and send them promotional materials to use in marketing the service to new subscribers. Operators have also played essential roles in orchestrating local promotional events for HBO, such as screenings or season premiere parties. Eric Kessler described the special relationship thusly: "…the point of purchase [for HBO] is through the cable operator. So the cable operator also is an integral part of HBO's marketing machinery" (Ross, 1999, p. 20). This is another indication that differences in business models for the two types of cable networks lead to different takes on TV Everywhere. While all basic cable and premium networks collect subscriber fees from operators, HBO demands a higher per-subscriber percentage from operators than any other premium network, and that revenue is a significant contributor to HBO's bottom-line ("The Winning Streak," 2011). This is an example of the continued prominent role that long-standing relationships play, and HBO's negotiation of these dynamics as the post-network era evolves is of particular importance as the network's position as a leader in cable television means that it has considerable influence over the industry as a whole.

Operators are not the only public important to HBO's future vitality and growth. TNT and TBS executives have declared they are interested in providing consumers with the content they want, when they want it despite the fact that advertisers have been the networks' priority. In contrast, HBO subscribers are the key group the network must satisfy to remain profitable. As

Moscatelli put it: "People make the decision whether to purchase HBO every single month so we have to make ourselves worth paying for." Kessler echoed this sentiment in a 2010 interview with *Variety*:

> We're the ones that make consumers ask themselves whether our programming is different and high-quality enough that they're willing to pay for it. The challenge is to maintain the strength of that brand, so that the value of HBO becomes greater than ever. (Littleton, 2010, p. A2)

One way that HBO has promoted HBO Go in the early 2010's is by asserting that it adds value to an HBO subscription and prevents subscribers from canceling the service, and of course, this same business model is used by Netflix and other online content providers as well. If people are more satisfied with what they get out of subscribing to HBO, they are more likely to continue. One goal of HBO's approach to TV Everywhere is to fight viewer churn and build the subscription base. HBO's marketing of HBO Go within the frame of "We're here for you!" sidestepped the powerful financial motivations behind the cross-platform technology. As with Turner Broadcasting, HBO is a major media corporation with the primary purpose of making money. The post-network era's economic reality is characterized by uncertainty due to the threat of subscription cancellations; this has always been a danger but is more so in the face of strong online competitors like Netflix as well as an inability to maintain relevance with younger generations.

According to a scholar who attended an Entertainment and Technology Summit, in the year 2000, the average age of an HBO subscriber was 38, but by 2013, that number jumped to 48 – which allows one to surmise that HBO viewers are getting a year older every 15.6 months (Perren, 2013). The implication of this surprising statistic is that HBO has not added any new subscribers, or at least not new subscribers from younger generations. Though for reasons having to do with advertisers, young viewers are also a key part of Turner's strategy and attracting that demographic played a major role in the decision to bring Conan O'Brien on board. HBO also made programming decisions to produce original series that would appeal to a younger audience, such as *True Blood* (2008-current) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-current) with the most obvious attempt being Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-current). In keeping with their coalition audiences strategy, executives further hoped that HBO Go would attract millennials, who use the internet more frequently than older viewers. An interview with Chris Albrecht as early as 2007 discussed the network's attempt to go digital to capture a younger audience (Zeitchik, 2007). Deana Myers, a senior analyst at SNL Kagan, spoke about the strategic use of HBO Go to draw young viewers into the HBO community: "[HBO] use[s] digital platforms as a way of reinventing themselves and targeting new demographics" (Young, 2010, n.p.). In an earlier interview that year, Myers posited that HBO's subscriber stagnation was an indication that it had peaked and advised the network to diversify its business model in order to continue growing revenue in the post-network era (Wallenstein, 2010, n.p.). HBO took that exact approach and expanded its offerings and promotions to target a new group of viewers who were also likely to embrace the HBO Go service.

My interview with Scott Moscatelli and his colleagues at HBO included a discussion of HBO's outreach efforts on college campuses. These efforts involved selecting "ambassadors" from the student population to work as representatives of HBO. HBO then gave the student ambassadors iPads loaded with various clips of HBO programs they were encouraged to share, promotional materials, such as posters, and merchandise, such as DVDs, to distribute at their discretion and instructed them to organize screening parties on campus to view series or season premieres. Encouraging social media engagement was another goal the ambassadors worked towards while the coordinators counted Facebook "likes" as a way to measure the program's success. The philosophy guiding the initiative, according to Bethany, the coordinator, was:

> HBO is really one of the things that if you give people a taste of, people will really latch on and become a brand loyalist to HBO and their shows…so the idea behind that is, if you give people enough or just a little bit of a taste now, then when they graduate and get jobs, they'll still have that need and want to have HBO moving forward. (personal communication)

While Bethany's description bears some similarity to a drug dealer's approach to get someone addicted to heroin, it is also a signal of HBO's commitment to and investment in developing a younger viewing audience. When I asked if such campaigns would continue in the future, Moscatelli responded, "Yeah. Shows, Go, the brand, all things HBO. We want college to be aware of this, and we want them to be familiar with the brand." The campaigns were strategically structured around programs that targeted and appealed to millennial viewers, such as *How to Make it in America* (2010-2011)*, Game of Thrones* (2011-current), and *Girls* (2012-current). My research suggests that their ability to attract a younger demographic had an impact on HBO executives involved in making programming decisions. I asked Moscatelli why those shows were selected for the college marketing campaign, and he said, "…Typically, it's a very young audience that those shows are going to draw, and it's a very young audience that are watching TV online more often than not so it's a natural fit." This is an excellent example of the shared economic concerns and overlap that exists between and impacts programming, marketing, and technology – all of which are more connected now than in previous decades due to the difficulties and threats of the post-network era. Due to HBO's college brand ambassador program along other similar strategies including HBO Go and new hit series, the network added two million subscribers in 2013, which was the largest increase in viewership in 17 years (Lang, 2014).

Another major post-network era threat HBO faced was the rise of competitors in the digital environment, and there has been no bigger threat to HBO than Netflix. Just like its sister siblings TNT and TBS, the premium channel embraced TV Everywhere as a defensive strategy. Unlike Turner, however, HBO owned most of the television content it aired so the pay cable network didn't battle studios over issues related to digital rights. This difference better positioned HBO to succeed in a non-linear environment, particularly since Netflix doesn't own its original content. In fact, Netflix's TV programming has been either original series produced by other media companies or programs that previously aired on linear TV networks. HBO never granted streaming rights to Netflix for any of the programs it owned, which made it easier to launch HBO Go and was a strategic decision to hurt, or at the very least not help, its rival.[22] Another advantage of HBO Go is that it brought the fight directly into the online space, Netflix's territory. Braxton Jarratt is the C.E.O. of Clearleap, which is a technology company that has developed software to make it easier for networks and distributors to stream content online and on various devices. He explained the need for networks to establish a presence across platforms:

> The notion is [networks are] already starting to lose that customer who's connected [to] a Roku box. But instead of having them go to Netflix or Amazon Video On Demand, why not put your content right next to it? Now they can go to you for new-release movies. (Dickson, 2010, p. 14)

Lapan (2009) offered a similar recommendation when she argued that networks "fight content with more content" (370). HBO has a tremendous library in the hundreds of episodes of its original series along with films and miniseries and can hold its own with Netflix on the content standpoint. Its brand also offers benefits in the fight against competitors. A number of scholars

[22] HBO does have a history of competing with Netflix over rights and pricing for Hollywood films, but I am omitting that analysis from this discussion to focus on television rather than address the film industry or complicated negotiations and dealings with major movie studios. I do want to acknowledge this component, which is part of HBO's overall Netflix strategy, and recognize that while it is not discussed here, I understand that films play a main role in HBO's programming on HBO Go, particularly overseas.

(Bellamy & Traudt, 2000; Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2002; McDowell, 2004; McDowell, 2006) have studied the value of strong television network brands, and each confirmed that brands with high awareness have a discernible competitive advantage. "For many businesses, the brand name and what it represents are its most important asset – the basis of competitive advantage and of future earnings streams," and HBO has the brand equity needed to succeed in the digital arena, with HBO Go competing on the same platforms and devices alongside Netflix and Amazon (Aaker, 1991, p. 14). Building off Van der Leun and Mandel's (1996) theory that attention is the commerce of the internet, Fuchs (2013) contends that the online television marketplace has operated as "…a stratified online attention economy in which the trademarks of powerful media actors work as powerful symbols that help the online portals of these organizations to accumulate attention" (p. 82). Brands established in linear television are often best poised to succeed[23] in the new online space because of their recognizability and resources, but also because over the years, cable networks developed and tested several effective branding strategies. This is a major advantage of the TV Everywhere model compared to newer, less firmly established viewing platforms.

4.3. Multichannel Era Branding in the Post-Network World

A study quoted in a 2000 *Broadcasting & Cable* article declared that the households with internet access were the most affluent and compared that statistic to the multichannel era when homes with higher income levels were most likely to subscribe to cable. The article quoted Larry Goodman, then-president of CNN sales and marketing, on how to interpret that fact: "The opportunity is to use the internet in the way that cable was used in the early '80s"

[23] Success in the internet television environment looks much like it does for traditional television models and is measured in brand awareness, viewership numbers, and revenue accrued.

(Kerschbaumer, 2000, p. 43).[24] In the post-network era, cable networks are doing exactly that, as Chris Falkner of NBCUniversal encouraged his colleagues to do at the 2011 Cable Show: "Let's take the things that already exist, and let's leverage those and the processes and lessons about how to do business and use that to build a new ecosystem." I argue that this is already taking place and has been for a few years now as the second phase of the post-network era has evolved, starting at around 2011 when HBO Go first launched as a mobile application. The development of non-linear television shares much in common with the evolution of the early cable industry so established cable networks took what they knew about building brands and adapted branding strategies from the multichannel era for use in the online media environment.

Mullen (2003) argued that early cable copied the broadcast model in several ways for economic and cultural reasons. Their chief method of imitation was to recycle broadcast programming in the cable environment, and there were two main motivations for this. The first was to recoup high start-up costs because it was cheaper to air existing programs than pay to produce original content, and the same is true of cable's move online. Cable networks that owned the programs they aired on TV, as HBO does, were able to more easily share the content across platforms while networks like TNT and TBS had to negotiate and secure streaming rights before making shows available online. Turner's networks had a slower progression with this for series outside the Time Warner corporate family and for a couple of years struggled with having less content available, but ultimately worked with studios and secured the necessary digital rights (personal communication, May 7, 2010). The second reason for recycling programming was

[24] It is important to note the significance for a Turner Broadcasting executive in the year 2000 to compare television and the internet and make an argument for convergence. Not coincidentally, the AOL-Time Warner merger had been announced and was under consideration by the FCC at this time so it makes sense for executives affiliated with the merger to promote the amalgamation of television and the internet.

cultural, as Mullen (2003) argued. Viewers didn't want to radically change their viewing habits so familiar shows and genres made the transition smoother. HBO subscribers are familiar with the network's programming – whether or not they've watched a series or not, they have likely seen the promotions. With HBO Go's vast content library, subscribers have access to every episode of practically every series the network has aired in addition to select films (new releases and older titles), documentaries, and miniseries. Turner has worked hard to ensure it has episodes online and on-demand from its own series as well as reruns of broadcast favorites. The key difference between the execution of this strategy by HBO, TBS, and TNT in the post-network era compared to the multichannel era is that they have clearly established network brands that are able to engage viewers in an incredibly frenzied media landscape. It can be hard for content to be noticed in the noise of an overcrowded ecosystem, but familiar brands with familiar programming have a clear advantage with the audience.

Mullen (2003) also discussed the use of "framing" by cable networks to reframe broadcast content for the cable brand. In the post-network era, networks provide context for series with a branded platform that is either the official network website or a mobile viewing application. This is yet another example of the networks operating by using a very defensive set of strategies intent on conserving the status quo. At the 2011 Cable Show, Henry Schleiff stressed the need for this in the online arena:

> What gets lost [online] is the importance of the brand subsuming the programming, and that's what you get from YouTube. When you watch something on HBO you're coming with a level of expectation, but without context, some shows might not be viewed as well. The importance of context that a linear network and brand give to these random shows is priceless.

In the early 2010s, it has been challenging for cable networks to assert strong, recognizable brands, encourage viewer engagement, and remain relevant while viewers have been watching network programs on digital platforms, such as Hulu or YouTube, where the network brand is not present. When a network's brand is disembodied from its programming, networks run the risk of having the content subvert the channel brand. Cable networks have struggled to attract viewers to the network's branded space, but modify and apply strategies that were effective in the multichannel era to the internet television marketplace. The on-screen logos that Turow (1998) described provided enough context in the multichannel era and still have relevance in the TV industry today, but inserting bugs onto a platform like Hulu or Amazon can be a contentious negotiation for network executives. For example, I spoke with the director of digital distribution for a basic cable network who expressed frustration in her dealings with Hulu over the size of the network logo. Hulu wanted the logo smaller, presumably to prioritize the Hulu brand, while the executive wanted the logo larger so that viewers watching a show online would know where to find it on linear television. Such power disputes are typical in the post-network era as historic relationships between distributor, producer, creator, and viewer get renegotiated and restructured due to the industrial uncertainty of the time.

In the multichannel era, cable networks repurposed broadcast reruns in two distinct ways (Mullen, 2003). The first was by airing marathons. This served to raise awareness about where viewers could find reruns for a particular series and was often used as a counterprogramming strategy. In the post-network era, viewers use VOD and online/mobile content to create their own personal "binge viewing" marathons. HBO Go can be more easily used for this purpose than TNT or TBS because of the vast content library it provides for subscribers, and this highlights a key difference between copyright ownership versus licensing. However, all three networks offer opportunities for audiences to catch up on the previous seasons of a show before a new season premieres by offering past episodes on-demand. A white paper put together by Tribune Media Services called the Data-Driven Entertainment Guide cited that 62% of VOD viewers regularly view several episodes in a row. The report explained the potential economic benefits of binge-watching:

> Extending the life of older catalog content is a significant way to realize extra return on the investment. Catch-up viewing of missed episodes can get consumers hooked on – and willing to pay for – premium programming. And making this content accessible onscreen creates an engagement platform that can drive subscription and advertising revenue alike. (TMS, 2013)

Legacy players have an investment in non-linear streaming for the chance that it would bring viewers back to linear viewing and, thus, preserve the traditional cable model. In the same way that TBS might have offered a *Friends* (1994-2004) marathon to counterprogram against football playoffs, binge-watching is consumer-driven counterprogramming and with the use of new media technologies, viewers have been able to indulge in marathons of TV series anytime and anywhere they want.

The second way that networks repurposed reruns in the multichannel era was with hosted programs, such as TBS' *Dinner and a Movie* (1996-2008), and there are examples from Turner and HBO of different interpretations of this branding strategy in the post-network era (Mullen, 2003). In 2006, TBS launched a website called veryfunnyads.com that featured "the largest online collection of funny commercials from around the world" (Umstead, 2006, p. 21). This coordinated with television specials and a 2007 branded entertainment opportunity with Sonic and Nationwide auto insurance called "Everybody Loves Funny Commercials" that "tease[d] 'very funny' commercials during the first break in its acquired sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*" (Becker, 2007, p. 10). Another touted benefit to the branded entertainment was that it could discourage DVR viewers from fast-forwarding through ads. The Very Funny Ads initiative took the multichannel idea of hosted programs and updated it for the post-network era by using it to reinforce the brand, extending it into new platforms and wielding it to combat post-network era threats like DVR viewing. It is also an excellent example of how Turner (specifically here, TBS) took a linear network brand into the digital space. Furthermore, Turner generated additional revenue with the venture by securing sponsorship deals for the branded entertainment component and selling advertising during the televised specials and online.

HBO's version of hosted programs has been their development of supplemental content on HBO Go to encourage second screen viewing. This is in keeping with the cinematic part of the "quality TV" mantra as it is a tactic that's more akin to DVD extras than the more televisual practices on TBS, and in addition, it served to reinforce HBO's brand identity on television and on mobile devices. HBO Go offers a variety of materials that complemented HBO's original series, including behind-the-scenes videos, interviews with cast and creators, and other items that create what HBO executives refer to as "enhanced viewing experiences" (Morabito, 2011, p. 23). None of these have been as successful as the materials created for HBO's hit series *Game of Thrones* (2011-current), and that is because certain genres lend themselves towards supplemental content more than others. Science-fiction and fantasy typically have fans that want to further engagement with the text, and such programs often feature complex storylines that can be difficult to follow (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2008).

The *Game of Thrones* (2011-current) HBO Go experience consisted of "maps, character bios, family trees, and other content shown simultaneously and timed to each episode" (Morabito, 2011, p. 23). Rather than a second-screen experience, the content appeared alongside the show when an episode was viewed within the HBO Go platform. Executives within HBO's digital media department worked directly with the show's producers and writers to coordinate the material and seamlessly integrate it with the text. Alison Moore, S.V.P. of digital platforms, explained the process: “As the scripts came in, we started isolating points within a script that we thought might be interesting to a fan base” (Morabito, 2011, p. 23). The *Game of Thrones*-hosted program reinforced the HBO brand, enabled viewer engagement and interactivity with the HBO digital platform and encouraged viewers to watch episodes multiple times – all of which support viewer retention and fight churn, key goals of the TV Everywhere model: “More is more. On the iPad, all you have to do is [swipe your finger] and you see everything else HBO has done. That’s a pretty powerful reason not to disconnect.” (Editor, 2012, p. 92)

Finally, Byars and Meehan (1994) and Mullen (2002; 2003; 2008) address the use of narrowcasting as the central branding strategy for cable networks in the multichannel era. Jenkins (2004) characterized the online media environment by its use of narrowcasting to allow consumers to determine which content is best suited for their needs and purposes. In his analysis of YouTube, Grusin (2009) argued that the internet, and YouTube in particular, created “a divergence culture…that is fragmented, niche-oriented, fluid, and individuated” (p. 66). The “personcasting” and creation of “self-determined gated community” that Lotz (2007) contends characterized the post-network era is possible and prevalent in the internet media space. Online, anyone has the ability to create and distribute content, which leads to consumer-generated media in the form of blogs, vlogs, YouTube channels, Vines, and web series – in addition to the plethora of older content that is accessible via online distributors such as Amazon and Netflix. However, it is difficult for any content to rise above the fray and find success on a large scale financially and in terms of viewership. Waterman (2001) identified three reasons that explain why niche content would not be able to dominate the online media environment: 1) The demand for niche content is too low to survive; 2) Post-network era audiences expect and want high production values, but niche content generates too little income for creators to afford such costs;

and 3) The only way to gain attention in a crowded marketplace is with marketing, which niche content creators do not have the resources to produce (p. 229). In addition, established cable networks have the brand recognition, content libraries, experience, and the backing of major media conglomerates. With these advantages, networks like TNT, TBS, and HBO have used multichannel era branding strategies to establish an online presence and cross-platform relevancy for purposes unique to their own particular organization and financial goals. For these combined reasons, I maintain that linear cable networks will negotiate rules for the new media ecosystem, which they will dominate in economic, cultural, social, and structural ways just as they have under the traditional television model.

5 BRANDING WITHOUT BORDERS: EVOLVING ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES IN A NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE

From 2001 to 2011, there were a number of significant changes that impacted the television industry and continue to threaten the financial strength and success of cable television networks. These changes include: 1) audience fragmentation due to increased competition from rival networks, new digital content providers, and new ways of consuming television programs; 2) mobile and online viewing applications that made time and place shifting possible and removed the direct association between a network and its programs; and 3) the growing prevalence of television households with digital-video-recording devices. This detailed case study of Time Warner properties has demonstrated that branding has served as a major combatant utilized by the television industry as it struggled against these threats, and as a result, it is an excellent lens through which we can better understand how and why cable network executives responded to these challenges with the particular strategies and tools they harnessed. In this final chapter, I first provide an overview of my key findings and contributions, discuss prominent Time Warner properties and broader industry trends in branding, and then end with recommendations for future research.

5.1. Key Findings and Contributions

This study fills a major gap in existing media scholarship because most research conducted on branding thus far has originated out of business schools rather than coming out of television studies or media industry studies. In addition, this scholarship has focused on identifying best practices rather than advancing our critical understanding of strategies employed by the cable television industry. It also challenges assumptions presented by scholars, such as Lotz (2007), Ross (2008), and Himberg (2014), who argue that cable television programming is becoming more niche and narrowly focused. Instead, I see cable networks using strategies like widercasting and coalition audiences to broaden their content, open up their brands, and appeal to more viewers. These strategies directly confront the overvaluation of fan communities as economically valuable to networks, and I push back on work by Selznick (2009), Jenkins (2006; 2008), and Gray (2007; 2010) for not sufficiently recognizing that at a time of increased audience fragmentation and new competition from non-linear television services, cable networks have needed to attract as many viewers as possible. While it is true that cable networks want more viewers, I recognize that these networks want more of the right kind of viewer and prefer those that are affluent, young, and tech-savvy; I also agree with Napoli (2001) and Turow (2008) argument that such segmentation of the audience exacerbates societal inequalities. This dissertation elucidates the challenges of the post-network era and shows the important role that branding plays within it as cable networks use brands to manage uncertainty. Lotz (2007) and Ross (2008) examine how new media technologies provide new abilities for audiences to time and place shift, but I take their argument a step further by incorporating a consideration of how networks use branding to combat these threats.

Media industry scholars are only beginning to examine television branding in the post-network era, and very few have looked exclusively at the branding and promotional strategies used by a specific cable network or across one particular media conglomerate. Time Warner's use of branding during the 2000s underscores the two main ways that cable television network branding functions – first, as a performance intended for competitors, distributors, and other key industry players; and second, as a means of rationalization, essentially a tool that network executives can wield whenever they want or need to justify a decision, action, or behavior. Thus, ultimately, branding means very little in terms of practice. Both basic cable networks, like TBS and TNT, and premium networks, such as HBO, use branding to deal with similar issues and the brands that are most effective at accomplishing the networks' objectives are ones that are flexible. This is because they can best be shaped and molded for any purpose or to push back against any potential challenge. TBS and TNT, as I argue, have used widercasting for these reasons while HBO used an updated variation of Jim Collins' coalition audiences strategy.

Although both types of cable networks use branding to manage similar threats, they employ it in different ways because of their different industrial and economic structures. For example, TBS and TNT use widercasting in hopes of securing higher subscriber fees, higher advertising revenue through the facilitation of unique ad deals and partnerships, and higher ratings, particularly in key demographics that would help accomplish the first two goals. I see TBS and TNT as attempting to be the "broadcast of cable," and many Turner executives say that outright. While they have avoided assuming some of the less appealing attributes of broadcast television, such as losing the ability to play the same episode of a series multiple times a week, they have taken on some of the more beneficial aspects in a chase after broadcast-like ad dollars and ratings. A key example of this, drawn from my second chapter, was the move into late night with Conan O'Brien.

HBO, in contrast, does not rely on advertising and does not care about ratings in the same way (although, of course, they do care about them in their own way). As a result, HBO pursued coalition audiences most aggressively after a mid-2000s slump period by programming to various demographics, some of which it had not targeted before, in hopes of attracting more subscribers. HBO doesn't care as much about ratings as other networks, but by attempting to offer "something for everyone," they have been able to increase their subscriber base to a 17-year high as of 2014 (Lang, 2014). The HBO "quality TV" brand has been deployed differently at different times throughout the network's history from its launch in 1996 to 2015, and the flexibility of that brand has afforded HBO many benefits, including praise from media critics. Chapter 3 also challenged the viability of HBO's quality claims and questioned the role that critics, as well as scholars, have played in unquestioningly perpetuating the aura of the HBO "quality" brand.

I see HBO's quality brand along with TBS and TNT's brands as examples of flexible brands, and another major motivation for the use of flexible brands has been that such brand identities are easier to move across platforms and translate better in the non-linear television environment. Turner and HBO also applied the TV Everywhere model in different ways due to their different structures and business models. For example, HBO has used its mobile viewing application, HBO Go, as a value-add to increase subscribers, while Turner has pursued digital advertising initiatives to increase revenue. In these differences, we see competing visions not just of TV Everywhere, but also of what "television" means in the non-linear world. However complex their variations may be along with the corresponding motivations, both approaches have been defensive and reactive yet presented through industry-speak such as journalistic discourse and marketing materials as innovative. Additionally, HBO and Turner executives have portrayed their TV Everywhere models as new despite the fact that they have relied largely on old structures and old strategies. What I found in my research was that established cable power players, such as TBS, TNT, and HBO, used branding to claim they were being original when they truly remained bound to the limitations and structures of the past, recycling many previously used tools and tactics.

5.2. Time Warner Properties and Broader Industry Trends in Branding

Outside of TBS, TNT, and HBO, much of note has happened within the larger Time Warner conglomerate since 2011. Although this dissertation focused primarily on those three cable networks, there have been many interesting developments within other Time Warner divisions and properties that present a broader picture of the post-network era, its changes, and challenges. For example, in March 2009, Time Warner spun off its cable division, Time Warner Cable, and in December of that same year, the conglomerate separated from AOL. Perhaps a more surprising move came in June 2014, when Time Warner spun off its print and publishing arm, Time, Inc. All of these decisions by C.E.O. Jeff Bewkes can be seen as moves to focus more heavily on film and television entertainment and to streamline its assets. In 2013, *The New York Times* characterized the decision to split off from Time, Inc. as a "strategy [that] highlights Mr. Bewkes' confidence in its high-margin cable channels, like TNT, TBS, and HBO, which brought in $3.67 billion in revenue in the most recent quarter" (Chozick, 2013, n.p.). It showcases the power of the cable television network business and completes a full-scale shift in industrial thinking from the merger and acquisitions craze that led to the failed AOL Time Warner debacle. In the chart below, the value that the networks division brings the parent company is clear:

Table 5.1: *Time Warner Inc., Income Statement, Revenues (USD $ in millions)*

12 months ending	Dec. 31, 2012	Dec. 31, 2011	Dec. 31, 2010	Dec. 31, 2009	Dec. 31, 2008	Dec. 31, 2007
AOL	---	---	---	---	4,155	5,181
Cable	---	---	---	---	17,188	15,955
Networks	14,213	13,654	12,480	11,609	10,208	10,270
Film & TV Entertainment	11,206	11,784	10,844	10,453	10,854	11,682
Publishing	3,415	3,628	3,653	3,723	4,579	4,955
Revenues	28,729	28,974	26,888	25,785	46,984	46,482

(Time Warner Annual Reports 2012 and 2014; Stock Analysis on Net)

It made obvious sense for Time Warner to separate from AOL as the latter was struggling on many fronts, and there was still discord from the financial and legal repercussions in the aftermath of the merger and the fraud that resulted from it. Time Warner spun off its cable MSO in part because cable operators have different needs in terms of investment and infrastructure than content providers. As the post-network era continued to evolve along with new media technologies and consumer demands, the spinoff meant Time Warner didn't have to have as much cash on hand. Finally, as Table 1 shows, there were small decreases in revenues each year for the conglomerate's publishing division. Print media faced their own unique set of challenges as the internet became a more dominant source of information and subscriptions subsequently fell. Compared to the other divisions, which grew incrementally year after year, spinning off the publishing arm allowed the conglomerate to focus on its greatest strength: cable television. As I argued in the first chapter, the cable television industry has been growing financially stronger, more powerful, and playing an increasingly important role in the future of the media industry as a whole. The spinoff decisions by Time Warner demonstrate just that.

In terms of branding, other Turner networks also redefined themselves to better compete in the post-network era. Notably, Cartoon Network, which launched in 1992, has used both widercasting and a mini-version of the coalition audiences strategy as executives enacted new approaches to branding and programming. Unlike TBS and TNT, Cartoon Network has always been a niche network first and foremost with programming that consisted of cartoons and targeted children. In 2009, likely a reaction to the success of the branding and widercasting strategies on sister nets TBS and TNT, the network rebranded and revamped its programming lineup. The push began in late 2008 with the announcement that the late night programming block for adults that premiered in 2001, Adult Swim, would start an hour earlier. Rather than target adults from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m., the network would start airing Adult Swim shows from 10 p.m. Media critic Alex Weprin of *Broadcasting & Cable* explained the reasoning behind the shift: "By expanding into the 10 p.m. hour Adult Swim will now compete directly with the broadcast networks, as well as cable channels such as Comedy Central, which programs its new episodes in that slot" (Weprin, 2008, n.p.). Thus, this the expansion of Adult Swim into a time directly competing with broadcast programming is another component of Turner Broadcasting's desire to create a level playing field with broadcast networks and acquire more broadcast-like ad dollars. The expansion has seemed to work. Adult Swim was number one in ratings for 18-49 – beating both broadcast and cable competitors for all of 2013. The network boasted a median age of 22.9 – much lower than Conan's and very attractive to advertisers (Carter, 2014). As a result, executives decided to make a more drastic expansion of the programming block, and in spring 2014, it began at 8 p.m. Adult Swim and its growth are evidence of the network's strategic pursuit of coalition audiences – targeting adults at night and children during the day.

In terms of the Cartoon Network's children's programming, the network used widercasting and launched new original series aimed at slightly older viewers to broaden its audience and create more advertising potential. The goal of the new series was to stretch its viewership beyond its base of 6-11-year-olds and into adolescents and teens "to lure advertisers from categories such as electronics and cell phone companies, which may be reluctant to market to younger kids" (Weprin, 2009, n.p.). As I have argued in previous chapters, basic cable networks' reliance on advertisers greatly affects the branding and programming strategies they use, and one benefit of widercasting is that it allows networks to target more advertisers and generate unique ad deals. Part of this push is Cartoon Network's "360 degree" initiative, which combines marketing efforts across platforms, particularly in the mobile and online arenas, and is similar to many of the TBS and TNT initiatives I've discussed. Chief marketing officer Brenda Freeman explained their aims: "We wanted to have a media plan that would appeal to our core [6- to 11-year-olds] but also had the breadth and depth to perhaps bring in 12- to 14-year-olds" (Weprin, 2009, n.p.). This is similar to my claims about TBS and TNT's use of widercasting. One thing that is unique about Turner Broadcasting compared to other network groups or conglomerates is that many Turner executives work for multiple networks at the same time so it makes sense that strategies occur across the group. Executives at Comcast-NBC Universal, in contrast, are more likely to work just for Syfy or just for Oxygen rather than two or three of the group's networks at the same time. For this reason, Turner Broadcasting's networks have a great deal of crossover in strategy and philosophy, which makes it a richer, more interesting case study of how branding works across a conglomerate.

My theory that branding is flexible and takes on whatever meaning the executives need it to at any given time holds up with Cartoon Network as well. In one of the interviews I did with mid-level Turner executives, I asked the interviewee to describe the Cartoon Network brand. She paused and fumbled around a bit before saying, "For kids? But I think, really, it's for boys because Nickelodeon is more for girls, and they wanted to do something different than that. Honestly, I guess I'm not that sure" (Personal communication, February 15, 2015). In all the trade publications and interviews I read in my research, I couldn't find a single instance of a Cartoon Network executive describing or defining the network brand in any meaningful way. Coupled with the uncertainty expressed by the executive I interviewed, this is further evidence of how branding functions as rationalization and as an empty signifier that stands in for whatever executives want it to. The rationalization aspect of branding is of particular value in dealing with the many challenges and threats of the post-network era. Cartoon Network's use of TV

Everywhere has been in line with TBS and TNT, and indeed, divisions across the Time Warner conglomerate have used the model, including the film studio Warner Bros., which launched a standalone subscription service called Warner Archive Instant in July 2014. The conglomerate's vast library is certainly one of its strengths moving forward, and I'd like to take a closer look at the differences and similarities that may exist as Timer Warner's various assets adopt the TV Everywhere model.

Non-linear television services, such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, are currently trying to figure out what branding means to them as they attempt to stake out a place in the new media landscape. Although they are often linked together, the three services have distinct and important differences in terms of structure and economics. Netflix provides content without ads, licenses but doesn't own original series, and has the largest library of the three. Disney-ABC, NBC-Universal, and Fox own Hulu, and it is privately held. It has a dual revenue stream from subscriptions as well as advertisements. Amazon began in 1992 as a bookseller and general merchandise retailer, but expanded its horizons by launching Amazon Studios in 2010 and Amazon Instant Video in 2011. Its financial assets are diverse, which serves as both a strength and weakness. All three pay licensing fees, which account for the difference between their revenues and net incomes. In fact, Amazon and Netflix spend billions per year to purchase the rights to stream content. Below is a table comparing the revenue and income of the three:

Table 5.2: *Financials of Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu*

	NETFLIX	**AMAZON**	**HULU**
Price (per month)	$8-$12	$8.25	$7.99
2014 Subscribers (in millions)	37.7	40	6
Revenue (2012)	$3.6 billion	$61.1 billion	$695 million
Revenue (2013)	$4.37 billion	$74.5 billion	$1 billion
Revenue (2014)	$89 billion	$5.5 billion	N/A
Net Income (2012)	$17.15 million	-$39 million	N/A
Net Income (2013)	$112.4 million	$275 million	N/A
Net Income (2014)	$266.8 million	-$241 million	N/A

(Kumparak, 2013; Rodrigues, 2015; Seitz, 2015; Diffen.com)

While each of the non-linear television services have different programming structures, goals, and financial organization, none embraced branding in the ways that their linear competitors in the cable industry did. I see the strength and familiarity of TBS, TNT, and HBO's brands as offering the networks a boost in terms of getting noticed by consumers, but non-linear television services do not see a value in branding for their business model. Jeff Bezos, the founder and C.E.O. of Amazon, has eschewed branding for several years. In a 2000 interview, he said, "The companies that rely on brand loyalty are insane" (Sheff, 2000, n.p.). He went on to say that the only thing that matters is whether or not the company is pleasing the customers, and as long as the customers were happy, they would be loyal. When he has been asked what the Amazon brand is, he has sidestepped the question and talked instead about the company's approach to its business and managing the customer relationship. On the other hand, Hulu CEO Mike Hopkins has said he values branding, though not his own company's: "We look at network brands as a benefit to us" (Hagey and Ramachandran, 2015, p. A1). Such statements are interesting to consider, but must be taken with a grain of salt as I see much of trade speech as performative, particularly when it comes to branding. A key observation I made in previous chapters was that industry discourse about brands is as much about communicating key messages to major industry players as it is about communicating to the audience. Media companies communicate in this way because it is often very effective. In 2015, Turner Broadcasting moved its content from Netflix to Hulu in large part due to Hulu's agreement to promote the current seasons of shows it licenses.

The business model is different for Hulu, of course, than for Amazon, and just as I argued that different types of cable networks needed distinct brand strategies, the same is true in the non-linear television environment. As Table 5.2. shows, Amazon makes huge numbers in terms of revenue, but sometimes struggles in terms of net income. Amazon "barely ekes out a profit [and] spends a fortune on expansion and free shipping…" (Yglesias, 2014, n.p.). A clear and specific brand might be difficult and not as helpful for its diverse goals as HBO's quality brand has been for the premium network. However, moving forward, Amazon may need to articulate a clear brand for its Instant Video service because, as a customer survey conducted in 2015 demonstrated, its subscribers have trouble distinguishing the streaming content service from its free shipping and retail business (Lynch, 2015). In contrast, I see Hulu as replicating much of the early cable model from the multichannel era, and Hopkins' above quote is an excellent example of that approach. Hulu currently relies heavily on television content previously aired on broadcast and cable networks just as early cable was solely dependent on syndicated broadcast series. For this reason, it makes sense that Hulu has not been focused on establishing a brand identity; however, in a presentation at an *Ad Age* event in spring 2014, Hopkins announced that Hulu would begin to focus on original series. The reason Hopkins gave for the move was to help the service define its brand. This is similar to Turner's decision to use *The Closer* (2005-2012) to brand TNT as the home for drama. As I have shown, branding works as performance for key players (such as Hulu executives speaking to a group of advertisers) as well as rationalization of programming decisions. The lack of a focused brand may offer similar benefits to non-linear television services, or they may eventually be forced to take up branding just as cable networks did when the post-network era was unfolding. Only time will tell.

Netflix has a unique business model as well when compared directly with Amazon and Hulu. It is solely focused on providing content to subscribers and, in fact, has no other source of revenue, which makes it quite different from its counterparts. Currently, the service has no brand or slogan. While it does advertise, it promotes some of its series much more heavily than others and depends upon its customers to find the programs on their own. In 2015, Netflix head of programming, Ted Sarandos, said, "I think in the pay-television world…the channel brand equity means a lot, and in our world, it really doesn't" (Adalian and Lockett, 2015, n.p.). Just as Hulu and Amazon have found success without establishing a clear brand, Netflix, despite its lack of branding, is often seen as a leader in the non-linear television world. In 2015, a research firm named iModerate conducted a survey of consumers that asked them to compare Neflix, Hulu, and Amazon. The findings were most favorable to Netflix as respondents reported that its variety was a key reason for its "dominance" and viewed it as shaping the television industry according to its own vision and goals (Lynch, 2015). Sarandos sees the diversity of Netflix's content as a key advantage and as the core of its brand: "Netflix is about personalization. Making our brand about one thing over another risks polarizing our consumers. Tastes are just way too broad for us to even consider it" (Curtin, Holt, Sanson and Sutter; 2014).

This comment articulates many of the ideas expressed in this dissertation. Like Sarandos, I see television branding strategies as valuing ambiguity and flexibility over specificity or substance. Like Hulu, I view Netflix's approach towards branding as reminiscent of the early days of cable when general entertainment networks, such as TBS and TNT, rebuffed branding in favor of letting the programming speak for the network. Netflix seems to have an awareness of branding's lack of meaning and an understanding of the benefits that come with broad, catch-all brands. This philosophy may best position Netflix for success in the non-linear media landscape and demonstrates its executives have learned lessons from the cable television network industry. Much like Turner and HBO use defined yet broad branding for the purpose of rationalization, operating without an established brand identity allows Netflix executives to justify any decision related to content. If the simple goal for Netflix is to provide variety to its customers, then executives can easily assert that any original series or acquired series it offers fits within the overall goals and promise of the service.

Netflix is in many ways a hybrid content creator, content provider, and a distributor. Cable distributors, such as Comcast, have historically not needed a well-established brand identity, and this element of Netflix's makeup has contributed to its ability to profit and maintain a strong subscriber base. When CEO Reed Hastings invokes HBO as Netflix's greatest competitor, he is attempting to argue for Netflix to be considered as a non-linear premium network, but an April 2015 *USA Today* article described Netflix as "the new Blockbuster" as in Blockbuster Video, the movie rental company (Antonoff, 2015). Without a distinct brand and due to the divergent roles it plays, such confusion is possible, especially in the post-network era when branding is a useful combatant against uncertainty and unpredictability. Linear cable television networks with different economic structures, goals, and revenue streams take different approaches to branding, and it will take time to see if and how non-linear media companies Amazon, Hulu, Netflix, and others like Sony's Crackle change their approach and understanding to branding. When Netflix does eventually produce original series that it airs, that may require revisiting their position on branding just as it did for TBS and TNT. Non-linear television recycles many of the aspects of the early cable model, yet with distinct differences and new slants. In particular, I am interested in conducting further examination of a non-linear television service, such as Netflix, to better understand which elements of cable television it embraces, specifically with regards to branding, and the motivations behind the decisions. Such a study would allow us to better understand the new model being created as the non-linear television landscape develops.

5.3. Recommendations for Future Research

In addition to taking a closer look at the use of branding by non-linear television companies, I'm also interested in taking a closer look at how niche cable networks use widercasting in different ways than their general entertainment counterparts. As the case study of Syfy presented in Chapter 2 demonstrated, widercasting works differently for niche networks than for general entertainment networks, and Lifetime is an excellent example of a niche network that has widened its brand and programming to welcome more segments of the audience into its viewing community. At its inception in 1984, the Lifetime Television Network defined itself as "Television for Women," aligning with the female demographic and declaring that it best addressed their unique interests and needs. Though the network has enjoyed much success, it struggled in the early 2000s as audience fragmentation and increased competition led to its ratings to sag. Lifetime's chief executive officer from 2007 to 2010, Andrea Wong, initiated a rebranding of the network in 2008 with a new, more general slogan, "My Lifetime." Wong claimed the goal of the initiative was to attract a "broader" audience and to make the network "relevant to *more* women" (Lafayette, 2008). A key move during Wong's tenure was when the network acquired the rights to Bravo's hit unscripted series *Project Runway* (2004-current) in 2009 in an attempt to attract new, younger viewers. Just as TBS and TNT did, Lifetime began producing original series as part of the rebrand. In 2015, the new Lifetime original series *Unreal* brought it critical acclaim and the youngest audience of any series in the network's history (McHenry, 2015).

With just this brief glance at Lifetime, it is clear that executives have used widercasting in attempts to increase ratings and attract more advertisers to the network, but I would like to further explore how niche networks like Lifetime use widercasting in different ways than their general entertainment counterparts. Other niche networks that are worth a closer examination include Syfy, which was touched on in the second chapter, and Bravo. In 1980, Bravo launched an arts and culture channel airing the opera and high fashion shows, but has become more focused on reality television. Although it has been primarily concentrated on the reality genre since the success of its *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) in 2003, I see it as using a form of the coalition audiences strategy in efforts to appeal to multiple niche demographics. In 2007, Sender characterized Bravo's targeting of the gay audience and the female audience as "dualcasting," but what has happened since then is much more expansive and is something I'd like to study in more detail (Sender, 2007).

Other areas that need added scholarly attention include Turner's continued acquisition of sports rights and its management of websites for sports organizations, such as the National Basketball Association. There is very little scholarship on the value of sports to television networks, and even less with regards to branding. Turner's aggressive pursuit of sports makes the programming central to its vision for its networks. Turner has always aired sports, but in the past few years, executives have aggressively pursued rights to fill more of the schedule with basketball and baseball. The network group strategically used sports to demand and obtain increases in advertising revenue from 2013-2015 and asserted the popularity of its sports content as a value proposition in negotiations with operators for higher subscription fees as well (Goldsmith, 2013; Steel, 2014; Perlsberg, 2015). Games have appeared on the networks, but subscribers have also had the ability to stream them. This has allowed Turner to sell advertising on both platforms, which surely helped with the increases as well. Turner's ability to increase advertising and subscription fees demonstrates the advantages afforded to it as a basic cable network. Its dual revenue stream has allowed it to compete on equal footing with broadcast networks over sports rights. Another strategic use of sports took place in 2008 when TruTV rebranded from CourtTV and used sports as a launching pad for the network redesign and to attract audience attention to its new programming slate. Sports programming is a central component to the network group's overall financial, programming, and branding strategies, and thus, it merits more consideration. I see it as another extension of Turner's reach into the broadcast arena with the primary goal of securing broadcast-like ratings and ad rates. I compare it to my discussion in Chapter 2 of how expanding into late night was a big move for Turner as it was a territory that broadcast networks dominated previously.

In terms of HBO, the pay cable network has used its new shows, such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-current), *Girls* (2012-current), and *Silicon Valley* (2014-current), to continue to target young, affluent, urban professionals, despite the fact that the programs don't fit the quality TV label as neatly as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). For example, the promotion of *Silicon Valley* (2014-current) at South by Southwest or *Game of Thrones* (2011-current) at Comic-Con were both strategic attempts to engage with attendees who could afford the travel costs and high ticket prices for such events. The promotion for *Girls* (2012-current) has similarly had a slant towards wealth, such as partnerships with the popular fitness studio SoulCycle, which is popular with celebrities and has expensive membership costs. Another marketing partner used to promote season three was Urban Outfitters. One media critic pointed out that the store was too pricey for the show's characters to afford their clothes (Parekh, 2013). Yet, if a portion of *Girls* (2012-current) fans can't afford the prices at HBO's marketing partners, they are likely familiar enough with the companies to desire the cultural cachet that comes with the products, and thus, still potentially part of that valuable "quality TV audience." Further evidence of this can be seen in the HBO promotional campaign "Awkward Family Viewing," which encourages viewers to watch HBO Go on any device "far, far away from your parents." Such campaigns make a tacit acknowledgment that HBO is aware many young viewers watch the shows without subscribing. When I interviewed Scott Moscatelli, we spoke about the college campaign for *Girls* (2012-current), and I am curious if the college students targeted with that marketing subscribed to HBO when they graduated. An audience study with the young, urban professionals that HBO has been targeting with these campaigns and marketing partnerships would be an interesting way to understand how such viewers interpret the network's branding. My analysis thus far has taken a top-down approach, but further research that looked at network branding from the bottom-up would paint a fuller picture of branding's role in the post-network era.

A final key development that I would like to give more attention to exploring is the decision by HBO executives at the end of 2014 to make an over-the-top (or "standalone") version of HBO available to non-cable subscribers (Spangler, 2014, p. 14). The service, called HBO Now, launched in the spring of 2015 at a price tag of $15 per month. Industry experts worried it would "shrink the number of people willing to pay for a full package of channels" and would be interpreted as "an open invitation to cut the cord" (Spangler, 2014, p. 14; Farrell and Baumgartner, 2014, p. 4). To ensure it didn't effectively blow up the MSO partnerships HBO still depends on, the network will be working with cable providers to target 10 million households in the U.S. that receive broadband internet service, but do not have cable subscriptions. Yet another example of adapting old practices into new models, it's hard to read the announcement as anything other than a glimpse of things to come as traditional television networks make bolder moves into the non-linear environment. I see genre shows like *True Blood* (2008-2014) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-current) as setting the stage for HBO Now. As the premium network opened up its programming to appeal to a wider segment of the audience, it welcomed more viewers into the HBO community. Though it has other revenue streams, HBO's bread and butter are its subscribers, and the more subscribers HBO can have, the better it is able to compete with competitors like Netflix threatening its standing in the marketplace. HBO's over-the-top service will likely give it greater advantage over Netflix as its price-point is twice that of a Netflix subscription. HBO's brand brings focus in a congested environment, but also provides it with opportunities for lucrative marketing partnerships, such as the ones discussed above, and to more easily transition into an a la carte world. A study of HBO Now would allow us to better understand the relationship between digital viewing on the linear television industry. I am also interested in seeing how HBO adjusts and shapes its branding in new ways to adapt to its new content delivery model.

It is difficult to predict how the linear and non-linear television landscapes will continue to evolve and change, but I do see branding as playing the chief role in how both take shape. The branding process has been and still remains a means by which to manage changes in the television industry, such as audience fragmentation, shifts in viewing behavior, new media technologies, and increased competition in an already overcrowded marketplace. Recognizing the performativity of branding discourse can shine light on inconsistencies and hidden motivations – all of which reveals the cultural and industrial work that goes into building and managing a television network brand. Linear networks have had practice with branding, which gives them an advantage in the unfolding digital environment, but as of 2015, the television industry is still very much in flux.

In my analysis of the branding and promotional strategies of TBS, TNT, and HBO, my goal was to show how fragile and uncertain industrial strategies in the post-network era are with regards to technology, partnerships, economics, programming, and distribution. I have aimed to elucidate an industry in transition, as established players grapple with current challenges and threats to the status quo. Branding remains a major way that cable networks like TBS, TNT, and HBO are trying to work through institutional, industrial, economic, and technological issues that have been and continue to shift. As the post-network era continues to take shape, Turner and HBO have both employed significant strategies and practices to solidify their place. TBS, TNT, and HBO all share a similar goal – to attract younger viewers. Due to the particularities of their different business models, they have worked towards this ambition in distinctive ways.

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