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Netflix, Amazon, and branded television content in subscription video on-demand portals

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Abstract

Branding has been described as the defining industrial practice of television's recent past. This article examines publicly available industry documents, trade press coverage, and executive interviews to understand the place of traditional television network branding in subscription video on-demand (SVOD) portals as represented by Amazon and Netflix. Focusing on materials relating to licensed rather than original content and this content's role within the US domestic SVOD market, two distinct approaches emerge. For Amazon, the brand identities of some television networks act as valuable lures drawing customers into its Prime membership program. For Netflix, linear television networks are competitors whose brand identities reduce Netflix's own brand equity. Ultimately, Amazon's efforts to build a streaming service alongside network brand identities and Netflix's efforts to build its own brand at the expense of such identities demonstrate the need to think about contemporary television branding as an ongoing negotiation between established and emerging practices.

Keywords

Amazon, branding, Netflix, network brands, television, video on-demand

Introduction

Although rumors of TV's demise have been greatly exaggerated, it is difficult to deny significant industry-wide shifts are reshaping American television as a medium and as a

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cultural form. In 2000, 69 million Americans subscribed to a cable television or satellite service; today, that number stands at 49 million (Sims, 2017). The growth of television advertising revenue has slowed and analysts predict that Internet advertising will overtake broadcast TV advertising for the first time in 2017 (Lynch, 2016). Between 2015 and 2016, the number of scripted original television series produced by online streaming services more than doubled from 46 to 93 (Goldberg, 2016). Furthermore, a 3% drop in viewing time among US audiences in 2015 has been linked to the increasing popularity of subscription video on-demand (SVOD) and over-the-top (OTT) services (Spangler, 2016).

With more than 180 million combined subscribers, Netflix and Amazon are major new players in the global mediascape. Among television scholars, however, many of the supposedly distinctive elements of SVOD and OTT services are understood as reflections of broader post-network era trends. For example, binge-viewing behavior associated with the ability to watch an entire season of a television show first became possible with the introduction of DVD box-sets in the late 1990s (Jenner, 2016). This article builds on such scholarship to argue that instead of 'killing' traditional television, Netflix and Amazon's marketing practices and programming decisions represent two different approaches to traditional television network brand identities in the US domestic SVOD market. The analysis begins with a discussion of contemporary television-branding practices. Next, a brief literature review outlines the dominant scholarly understanding of SVOD-branding practices. The next two sections examine publicly available industry documents, trade press coverage, and executive interviews following Caldwell's (2006) model of trade press discourse analysis to understand the place of network branding in SVOD portals as represented by Amazon and Netflix.

Amazon, first and foremost an e-retailer, primarily uses SVOD to drive customers to its Prime membership program whose members make more purchases more often than non-members. Stemming from this, the company has sought to forge symbiotic relationships with television networks in the interests of expanding its e-retail business. Amazon's 2014 decision to acquire much of HBO's content library and market their service as a purveyor of HBO-branded content reflects their faith in the continuing ability of traditional cable network brand identities to draw consumer interest and drive Prime membership subscriptions. The introduction of the 'Streaming Partners Program' in 2015 which became Amazon 'Channels' in 2016 can be understood as extensions of such symbiotic relationships. In contrast, Netflix has aggressively positioned itself as a replacement for linear television and views traditional television networks as its primary competitors. As a consequence of this strategy, the company acts to obscure the industrial origins of branded content by removing network logos from their user interface and promoting exclusive content as Netflix-branded originals. Although Netflix began allowing some pre-roll promotion and network logos on title cards in late 2015, the company continues to blur the lines between its original programming and other content, thereby positioning themselves as the audience's primary point of identification.

After examining Netflix and Amazon's approach to network brand identities, this article considers the value of branded content on SVODs for American cable networks. Despite network executives' claims regarding the importance of network branding, there is little reason to believe that brand prominence on SVOD platforms can reverse linear television's declining fortunes. Ultimately, Amazon's efforts to build a streaming service alongside network brand identities and Netflix's efforts to build its own brand at the expense of such identities demonstrates the need to think about contemporary television branding as an ongoing negotiation between established and emerging practices. In this case, such negotiations are being shaped by broader media industry shifts away from advertising revenue toward subscriber-based economic models.

Media branding and TV network brand identities

The purpose of media branding is to attract target audiences and build brand equity which 'represents the degree to which a brand's name alone contributes value to the offering' from the perspective of the consumer (Leuthesser et al., 1995: 57). According to Arvidsson (2006), generating positive brand equity necessitates 'fostering a number of possible attachments around the brand, be these experiences, emotions, attitudes, lifestyles, or most importantly, perhaps, loyalty' (p. 239). Brand equity is particularly important for developing customer loyalty among less committed consumers. Unlike heavy users who generally sample different products in order to find the best, light users primarily rely on brand image seeking out the brand leader in the field (McDowell and Batten, 2005: 33). These light users, marketing executives hope, can be turned into loyals (Jenkins, 2006: 63). Then, with a loyal customer base that finds value in the brand name or symbol, this brand can be used to maintain primacy within a market and support brand extensions including ancillary products (Grainge, 2007: 56).

Brands and branding have always been central for commercial television in the United States. Starting in the late 1940s and early 1950s, shows like *Texaco Star Theatre* and *General Electric Theater* blended brand awareness with entertainment. Discussing the era of TVIII (whose American correlate is often described as the 'post-network' era), however, Johnson (2007) posits that 'branding has emerged as *the* [italics in original] defining industrial practice' of television's recent past (p. 6). A TV brand, she argues, is the

> … interface/frame [that] manages the interactions between consumers, products and producers. […] In relation to the television channel, the brand is communicated to the viewer through programme production and acquisition, scheduling, on-screen advertising and ancillary products related to the channel and/or its programming. (Johnson, 2012: 17–18)

Beginning in the mid-1980s, increasing competition necessitated that American television networks, particularly cable television channels, generate distinct identities. Demographic network branding, as reflected by Lifetime's slogan 'Television for Women', was a common industry response to increasingly fragmented audiences (Hundley, 2002). MTV, for example, was, from the outset, constructed as a brand. According to Johnson (2013), MTV was 'a channel with a clear identity based on a set of values communicated through scheduling, design, and promotion and constructed to specifically appeal to (and generate loyalty from) a target audience' (p. 282). Since then, the number of cable television channels steadily increased. In 1994, cable subscribers had access to roughly 40 channels; by 2013, they had access to more than 180 (Ro, 2015). Yet, this increasing number of options, in and of itself, did little to impact the viewing behaviors. Although the number of available cable channels rose by more than 45% between 2008 and 2013, during that same period, American viewers continued to consume the majority of their television diets from an average of 17 or 18 channels (Spangler, 2014).

In this context, heavily marketed flagship programming reflects the brand identity that network executives are attempting to cultivate, thereby allowing the channel itself to assume an 'authorial functional' (Johnson, 2013). As Selznick (2009) observes in her analysis of the advertiser-supported cable network Syfy,

> Flagship shows aired by cable networks have the particular task of reflecting the brand attitude that network executives are attempting to cultivate. Viewers … will develop an image of a network as edgy, high-quality, educational, or the like based on the programmes aired. These brand images translate into viewer use and loyalty. (p. 184)

The most well-known example of flagship programming embodying a channel's brand identity is the case of HBO and *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007). Home Box Office (HBO), which began broadcasting in 1972 as a subsidiary of New York City's Sterling Manhattan Cable, initially distinguished itself from other cable networks with uncensored movies and sports programming. By the late 1990s, however, the network had become 'the TV equivalent of a designer label' with *The Sopranos* reflecting the brand identity encapsulated in its slogan, 'It's Not TV' (Edgerton, 2008: 9).

Although the 1980s and 1990s was a period of increasing fragmentation for the American television industry, as viewer choice expanded with the available number of cable channels, at the same time, ownership became increasingly concentrated. Today, the American television industry is dominated by six conglomerates: Comcast, 21st Century Fox, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, and CBS. For these conglomerates, television is part of a much larger entertainment business. Given increasingly segmented audiences, media conglomerates attempt to recreate the mass audience by using different subsidiaries to appeal to a variety of audiences. This practice, known as 'tiering', provides 'a wide range of niche taste cultures within the same corporate-semiotic family or umbrella' (Caldwell, 2006: 124). In some instances, conglomerates create the appearance of competition between two channels with the hopes of generating new subscribers for both as Time Warner did with HBO and Cinemax in the mid-1990s (Jaramillo, 2002). To serve the broader interests of media conglomerates, however, niche television audiences are not sufficient in and of themselves. Ideally, these viewers become die-hard fans supporting the television program, ancillary products, and related transmedia content. These viewers have become increasingly important since diminished audience size necessitated that networks develop multiple revenue streams to maintain budgets and remain competitive. Smaller audiences could be served, then, as long as they contributed to profits by engaging with texts in multiple distribution windows as well as purchasing merchandising and licensed goods.

Attracting multiple target audiences to various media within a corporate family became both more essential and more viable for media organizations enmeshed within larger conglomerates. Media organizations, then, must prove their significance to the larger conglomerate by delivering a desirable demographic that can be passed along to other members of the corporate family. One way for a media company to prove its value is by convincing viewers and industry insiders that what it does is distinctive and valuable. Grainge (2007) explains that the 'new emphasis on branding became a means of tapping into volatile and differentiated global markets while, at the same time, connecting and recycling content across multiple media platforms' (p. 52). Branding offers television networks, as well as other media companies, a way to reinforce these ideas so that they can create a beneficial media product not only for themselves but also for the entire conglomerate.

TV branding and streaming video services

As one form of Internet-based television, SVODs function as 'portals' (Lotz, 2016b: 134) by providing access to television content and acting as a gateway for viewers. Within the US domestic market, there are multiple types of SVOD services. One type of SVOD service, including Discovery Go or HBO Now, provides users with access to a traditional channel or network's existing library including new content once it becomes available on the linear schedule. Another type of SVOD service – such as Netflix, Amazon, or Hulu – employs organizational schemes that are best understood as cultivating or curating content libraries. However, the brand identities of these curated services are not tailored to specific audience demographics. Rather, Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu present themselves as portals that act as generalized landing places for viewers through which audiences can find a wide range of content matching their personal tastes.

Although Internet distribution does not require the organization of television into a linear schedule, the branding strategies of some SVODs borrow elements of traditional television-branding discourse. Frequently, such SVOD services invoke the rhetoric of 'quality TV' as a means to assert the medium's progress and place it in the same cultural category as cinema or literature. For example, in giving creative and budgetary freedom to television 'showrunner-auteurs' like Mitch Hurwitz and Jenji Kohan, Netflix attempts to create a brand identity where 'quality' content helps construct the brand by drawing attention to the artistic status of television as an authored text (Newman and Levine, 2012: 39). Amazon has also deployed this rhetoric in promoting its original series like *Transparent* (Barker, 2017). As such, these services are following a well-established television-branding strategy:

> … over the second half of the 1990s HBO developed a brand identity as the home of quality television in the USA that drew on a wide range of its programming, but was centred on the shift towards producing adult, edgy, authored and high-budget original drama series. While the brand identity was initially constructed through the promotional efforts of HBO itself, and then increasingly depended on these signature shows to stand in for the network, it also increasingly depended upon critical acclaim within the media more broadly to support its claim to be the home for creative talent. (Johnson, 2012: 32)

SVODs also use the discourse of 'quality TV' in relation to technological progress and emerging modes of audience engagement. In working to define its 'programming against traditional television', Tryon (2015) argues that Netflix echoes HBO branding strategies by reconceptualizing 'streaming as a more engaging form of television, one that exists on a technological and cultural cutting edge' (p. 106). In particular, SVODs often emphasize binge-viewing as a mode of audience behavior that improves upon traditional television's liveness and linear scheduling. As producers and distributors of original content, SVODs like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu have much to gain through their association with binge-able programming. As Jenner (2015) observes, 'supposedly "binge-able" texts also legitimise the viewing practice, and thus the medium: if viewers stand to earn valued cultural capital, it is socially acceptable to binge, rather than watch several hours of scheduled television' (p. 305).

Yet, there are many different strategies through which the business of creating and maintaining a library might be pursued and marketed. By focusing on SVOD-branding strategies that emphasize distance from and superiority to unspecified forms of traditional television, the available scholarship ignores the evolving relationships between streaming services and established network brand identities. Of the nearly 1200 shows available on Netflix in March 2016 (Luckerson, 2016), only 98 (about 8%) were Netflix Originals (Masters, 2016). The vast majority of television content in Netflix's library was written, pitched, produced, and first distributed by the system organized around traditional TV branding practices. The same is true for Amazon who have produced roughly half as many original series as Netflix (McAlone, 2015). Hulu, the third largest SVOD service in the US domestic market with 32 million subscribers (Feldman, 2017), presents a slightly different case. Although Hulu offers users a combination of original and licensed content, the service is a joint venture of major media conglomerates including Comcast, 21st Century Fox, Disney, and Time Warner. Given the concentration of ownership in the American television industry, Hulu distributes content licensed from subsidiaries within the same extended corporate family. As such, it seems particularly important to interrogate the ways in which streaming services like Netflix and Amazon use traditional television branding as these SVODs are separate corporate entities from the conglomerates that produce the majority of American television content.

To understand the relationships between SVODs and television network brand identities, this research examines publicly available industry documents, trade press coverage, and executive interviews. As Caldwell (2006) observes, material aimed primarily at investors and industry professionals functions as paratexts that 'promote and validate the "aura" and notion of an elite space inside the locked worlds' of organizations within the cultural industries (p. 130). As such, these paratexts construct highly controlled narratives that reveal industrial discourse, relationships within and between industries, and trends in the modern television industry. Focusing on materials relating to licensed rather than original content and the role of such content within the US domestic SVOD market, two distinct approaches emerge. For Amazon, the brand identities of some television networks act as valuable lures that draw customers into its Prime membership program. For Netflix, linear television networks are competitors and their brand identities are seen as impediments that reduce Netflix's own brand equity.

Amazon and the value of network branding for SVODs

Founded in 1994, Amazon.com is the largest Internet-based retailer in the world. Originally an online bookstore, the company later diversified and began selling a range of products including DVDs, CDs, video downloads/streaming, MP3 downloads/streaming, audiobook downloads/streaming, software, video games, electronics, apparel, furniture, food, toys, and jewelry. The company also produces consumer electronics and is the world's largest provider of cloud infrastructure services. In 2015, Amazon surpassed Walmart as the most valuable retailer in the United States by market capitalization (Kantor and Streitfeld, 2015), and was, as of late 2016, the fourth most valuable public company (Sommer, 2016).

The history of Amazon's video service is rather convoluted and includes several name changes and rebrands. Launched in 2006, 'Amazon Unbox' was a digital video download service that allowed customers to purchase single television episodes for US$1.99, purchase movies for US $9.99–US$14.99, or rent movies starting for US$1.99 (Amazon.com, 2007). Purchased videos were automatically stored in a customer's Amazon media library for future access and download. However, Unbox was not a streaming service as customers could only download titles and watch them on a PC (using the Amazon Unbox application) or a TiVo box. In September 2008, the service was renamed 'Amazon Video on Demand' and incorporated streaming capabilities allowing viewers to watch videos with a web browser (Amazon.com, 2008).

In February 2011, the service again rebranded becoming 'Amazon Instant Video' (Amazon.com, 2011a). This rebranding was particularly significant as it was accompanied by Amazon's first move away from selling customers access to content in a piecemeal fashion. Specifically, the service added access to 5000 movies and TV shows for Amazon Prime members – a membership for e-commerce customers offering free 2-day shipping within the contiguous United States for a flat annual fee. Although Amazon continued offering customers the ability to purchase individual television episodes or individual movies, the addition of a content library available to Prime members is particularly significant for the relationship that emerged between the company and traditional television-branding practices. Nonetheless, the promotional materials used to roll-out Amazon Instant Video focused almost entirely on movies. For example, promotional emails sent to existing Prime members told of 'unlimited, commercial-free, instant streaming of 5,000 movies and TV shows at no additional cost'. Yet, the images included in this email did not include title cards for any television shows.

In mid-2011, Amazon began expanding its content library through non-exclusive digital licensing agreements. The first such deal allowed Amazon to stream television shows from CBS' library including *The Tudors, Numb3rs, Medium*, the complete *Star Trek* franchise, *Frasier*, and *Cheers* (Amazon.com, 2011b). In a joint press release, CBS president and CEO Leslie Moonves said, 'This new agreement represents another meaningful way for us to realize incremental value for CBS's content' (Amazon.com, 2011b). Although the financial terms were not disclosed, trade press reports speculated that key terms were believed to be comparable to a 2-year library content deal that CBS struck earlier in the year with Netflix that analysts said is worth US$200m (Szalai, 2011). However, the title cards for the new shows in Amazon's library appeared without network logos in the web browser interface.

By late 2012, Amazon's content acquisition strategy had shifted toward exclusive digital licensing agreements. In December, Amazon announced an exclusive content licensing agreement with Turner Broadcasting System, Inc., and Warner Bros. Domestic

Television Distribution for exclusive streaming rights to TNT drama series *Falling Skies* and the Warner Bros. Television–produced TNT series *The Closer* (Amazon.com, 2012). Throughout 2013, similar deals were reached for the PBS and UK broadcaster ITV co-production *Downton Abbey*, FX's *Justified*, MGM's *Vikings*, among others. Although Amazon does not release the specific number of Prime members, publicly available information indicates that the acquisition of licensed content was positively impacting subscriptions. As noted in Amazon's 2013 Annual Report, Prime Instant Video is experiencing tremendous growth across all metrics – including new customers, repeat usage, and total number of streams. These are output metrics and they suggest we are on a good path, focusing on the right inputs (Amazon.com, 2014a).

Eight years after first launching a digital video service, Amazon began using network branding as a compliment to licensed content in April 2014 when the company signed a multi-year exclusive licensing deal with HBO for digital distribution rights to portions of the cable network's content library. Marketed as the 'HBO Collection', the deal gave Prime members access to all seasons of *The Sopranos, Six Feet Under, The Wire*, and *Deadwood* among others. Previous seasons of then-airing HBO shows like Girls, The Newsroom, and Veep became available over the course of the multi-year agreement, approximately 3 years after first airing. In addition, the deal allowed Amazon to offer HBO's stand-alone streaming app HBOGo on its Fire TV platform. In a press release, Brad Beale, Director of Content Acquisition for Amazon, was quite clear that the value in acquiring this content could not be separated from HBO's brand identity:

> HBO has produced some of the most groundbreaking, beloved and award-winning shows in television history, with more than 115 Emmys amongst the assortment of shows coming to Prime members next month … HBO original content is some of the most-popular across Amazon Instant Video – our customers love watching these shows. (Amazon.com, 2014b)

In contrast with earlier licensing agreements, Amazon promoted the HBO deal by creating a special page dedicated to the network's offering available through Amazon's platform. Although financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, industry insiders speculated that Amazon paid more than US$100m over the course of 3 years (Adalian, 2014). Discussing its content acquisition strategy without mentioning HBO directly, Amazon's 2014 Annual Report notes,

> We're investing a significant amount on this content, and it's important that we monitor its impact. We ask ourselves, is it worth it? Is it driving Prime? Among other things, we watch Prime free trial starts, conversion to paid membership, renewal rates, and product purchase rates by members entering through this channel. We like what we see so far and plan to keep investing here. (Amazon.com, 2015)

In December 2015, Amazon began featuring additional network brands when it launched a new initiative called 'Streaming Partners Program'. The program allowed Prime members to add subscription programming from 30 providers for an added fee to their Prime video service (several months earlier, the service shortened its name from 'Amazon Instant Video' to 'Amazon Video'). Some of the add-on programming includes Showtime, Starz, the Lifetime Movie Club, AMC's Shudder and SundanceNow subscription services, and

Comedy Central's Standup+ Service. Consumers are able to pick and choose these add-ons on an a la carte basis, and change their lineup month to month. In April 2016, Amazon introduced the 'Prime Video' stand-alone service. In contrast with previous manifestations of Amazon Video, this new service is independent from the company's Prime Shipping program. Costing US$8.99 per month, Prime Video costs one dollar less than Netflix's most popular plan. In December 2016, Prime Video expanded into the international market becoming available in more than 200 countries.

By December 2016, the 'Streaming Partners Program' had been renamed 'Amazon Channels' and included programming from nearly 100 providers. The service sells HBO for US$14.99 per month, and Cinemax for US$9.99 per month. While those subscriptions are available without a traditional pay TV package, they still require a subscription to Amazon Prime costing US$99 annually. In the case of HBO, subscriptions include the most recent content that was not included in the 2014 agreement. Describing the relationship with network brand identities, Michael Paull, Amazon's vice president of digital video, said,

> We make it very clear and lean into the brands of our partners. We're making it clear when you subscribe to HBO that the programming that you get is from HBO. The same for Starz. The same for PBS. We think it's really important for users to have the relationship with those brands and those shows. (Porch, 2016)

Specifically, network branding is prominently displayed when Prime users search for an individual show through both web browsers and OTT interfaces.

Netflix and the erasure of network branding

Netflix was founded in 1997 by Reed Hastings and Marc Rudolph, both software engineers, as an online-based DVD delivery service. In 2007, Netflix placed 10,000 titles from its 90,000 film library online in 'Watch Instantly' mode as a free value-added service to its large base of existing customers who had to use their ID and password to watch those films. In 2010, Netflix transformed its core business model from a monthly subscription for DVDs delivered to the home, migrating its customers to a monthly subscription service for unlimited movie and TV downloads via Watch Instantly, plus an extra monthly fee for unlimited DVDs delivered to the home.

At the same time, the company announced their intentions to expand the amount of television content offered through their service. Netflix started with particular content company deals, ABC/Disney for example, licensing full seasons of syndicated content. In a press release, Ted Sarandos, Netflix's (2010) chief content officer, said,

> Adding to our existing Disney-ABC lineup with great network and cable shows, and opening up ABC Family for the first time, are important steps in creating a wide and diverse selection of content Netflix members of all ages can watch.

In a report issued to shareholders at the beginning of 2011, Hastings explained the company's content acquisition strategy by noting that 'streaming is much bigger for us than DVD, in hours of entertainment delivered, and streaming is growing much faster than

DVD' (Hastings and Wells, 2011b). Yet, Hastings consistently positioned Netflix as a complement to, not a competitor with, cable networks known as traditional multichannel video programming distributors (MVPDs) in industry lingo. In a letter to shareholders in April 2011, Hastings wrote,

> Simply put, the data shows that Netflix is a supplemental channel to MVPD. While Netflix is likely to show huge growth again this year, we think MVPD cord cutting will be minimal to non-existent … We'll continue to push ahead, developing an ever-better user experience to differentiate Netflix, and exploring exclusive rights, where it makes sense, such as our *Mad Men* deal, so that we remain complementary to MVPD. (Hastings and Wells, 2011a: 4–5)

In the process of expanding its library with licensed content, however, conflicts with cable television networks became public. In March 2011, weeks after Netflix outbid several major cable networks, including HBO and AMC, for Media Rights Capital's drama series *House of Cards*, the SVOD lost the streaming rights to several Showtime shows including *Dexter* and *Californication*. According to press reports, CBS-owned subscriber-supported Showtime renegotiated their arrangement with Netflix in response to the service's growing popularity and in an attempt to use first-run series to attract and retain subscribers (James, 2011). In September 2011, the subscriber-supported network Starz announced that it was ending negotiations to renew its digital licensing agreement with Netflix. A statement released by Chris Albrecht, Starz's President and CEO, explained,

> This decision is a result of our strategy to protect the premium nature of our brand by preserving the appropriate pricing and packaging of our exclusive and highly valuable content. With our current studio rights and growing original programming presence, the network is in an excellent position to evaluate new opportunities and expand its overall business. (Finke, 2011)

As this statement indicates, there was a growing concern among cable networks that the popularity of SVODs, most notably Netflix, was leading audiences to abandon traditional cable subscriptions.

By 2012, Netflix was directly competing with linear television channels by introducing original streaming television series, documentaries, and stand-up comedy specials. The company's first original series *Lillyhammer*, 'a fish-out-of-water story set in Norway' starring former *Sopranos* regular Steven Van Zandt co-produced with the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), debuted in February 2012 (Hastings and Wells, 2011b). In a letter to investors, Hastings explained the company's original programming strategy in terms of economic efficiency:

> Another way to think of originals is vertical integration; can we remove enough inefficiency from the show launch process that we can acquire content more cheaply through licensing shows directly rather than going through distributors who have already launched a show? (Hastings and Wells, 2012)

Other executives, however, were quite transparent about the ultimate purpose of original programming. In an interview with *GQ*, Sarandos asserted that Netflix's primary goal was 'to become HBO faster than HBO can become us' (Hass, 2013). This organizational strategy was further confirmed in April 2013 when the company released a document titled ‘Netflix Long Term View’ which began with the statement, ‘Over the coming decades and across the world, Internet TV will replace linear TV’ (Netflix, 2013: 1).

In order to hasten this replacement, Netflix’s user interface obscured the branded origins of television content in order to better position themselves as the audience’s primary point of identification. Although its policy has never been made public, among industry professionals, Netflix has been known to deny requests for any sort of promotional branding at the start of the show and some network logos have been banned from shows’ title cards (Connelly, 2015). As press reports widely linked *Breaking Bad*’s ratings surge to the show’s presence on Netflix (Wallenstein, 2013), the user interface lacked any information linking the show to its broadcast network AMC. Netflix’s disregard for contemporary TV branding practices is also reflected in the company’s liberal use of the label ‘original’. As Lotz (2016a) notes, much of what Netflix promotes as original content is more accurately described as ‘exclusive’ in a particular market. For example, American users are told that Norwegian political thriller *Nobel* is a Netflix original despite the fact that the show was produced for NRK.

Fearing that Netflix users would forget who actually produced the show they were enjoying, in 2014, television network executives began loudly complaining about the streamer’s marketing practices. At an industry event, CEO of FX Networks John Landgraf said,

> One of the things that bothers me about Netflix is they make darn sure when they make an original series like *Orange is the New Black* or *House of Cards* that is identified with the phrase A Netflix Original Series. They are equally staunch about totally stripping AMC off of *Mad Me*n or FX off of *Sons of Anarchy*. (Steinberg, 2014)

After making similar complaints, Tom Ziangas, AMC Networks Research senior vice president, offered specific demands: ‘I want our stuff on Netflix to be branded. I want an AMC page with our content on there’ (Roettgers, 2014). Although Netflix does allow users to search for content by television network, the SVOD interface lacks branded pages for each network.

By late 2015, some pre-roll promotion and network logos could be found on Netflix. As part of a broader renegotiation, Netflix began allowing Walt Disney-owned ABC programming to appear as network branded content with the network’s logo on title cards for individual shows. In addition, episodes of the popular drama *How to Get Away with Murder* features a four-second glamor shot of star Viola Davis next ABC’s logo as the network’s theme music plays. Nonetheless, there is little reason to believe such concessions reflect a shift in Netflix’s broader strategy. As Hastings explained in 2016, ‘We knew there was no long-term business in being a rerun company, just as we knew there was no long-term business in being a DVD-rental company’ (Nocera, 2016).

Branded content and SVOD audiences

In early 2017, SVOD platforms Netflix and Amazon have incorporated more network branding than ever before. In the case of Amazon’s Prime Video service, the prominence of network branding is an extension of symbiotic relationships that began several years ago. For Netflix, the presence of any network branding marks a significant departure from the company's previously long-standing policies. Nonetheless, for advertiser-supported cable networks, the benefits of network branded content on SVODs remains unclear. This lack of clarity can, in large part, be attributed to Netflix and Amazon's near total lack of audience data transparency. Simply stated, there is no publicly available information regarding the popularity of licensed content on either SVOD platform. Unlike advertiser-supported networks for whom popular programs (as measured by the flawed Nielsen rating system) generate revenue by delivering viewers to advertisers, Netflix and Amazon are solely concerned with maintaining and expanding the number of subscribers willing to pay for access on a monthly or yearly basis. As a result, Netflix benefits from releasing misleading viewer 'data' that further blur the lines between its original programming and other branded content (Van Der Werff, 2015), while Amazon refuses to confirm the number of Prime subscribers (Kline, 2016) and says nothing specific about their engagement with Prime Video.

Beyond the lack of SVOD audience data, it is difficult to imagine how the increased visibility of network branding serves the ultimate economic interests of advertiser-supported cable networks. The availability of past seasons of shows like *Breaking Bad* and *Sons of Anarchy* on Netflix is often linked to rising season-over-season ratings and increasing advertising revenue for their networks AMC and FX (McNutt, 2013; Wallenstein, 2013). However, the majority of revenues for advertiser-supported cable networks do not come from advertising. Carriage fees, what cable and satellite systems pay cable networks for the right to include the company's programming on their channel lineup, ensure that networks like AMC and FX are profitable simply by remaining in a cable or satellite package. Between 2007 and 2013, AMC's carriage fees rose from an estimated 22 cents per customer per month to 33 cents (Seward, 2013). At the end of 2015, AMC Networks engaged in protracted negotiations with the National Cable Television Cooperative representing more than 700 small and medium-sized cable companies after demanding a 150% increase in carriage fees for its collection of channels including AMC, WE tv, BBC AMERICA, IFC, and SundanceTV (Lieberman, 2016). Yet, as carriage fees have been rising, the number of subscribers has been falling. At the end of 2013, AMC had an estimated 97.4-million US subscribers (AMC Networks, 2015). By the end of 2015, that number had dropped to 93.6 million (Steinberg and Littleton, 2016). It seems AMC, like many advertiser-supported cable networks, is approaching a tipping point where declining subscriber numbers will offset increasing carriage fees and overall revenue will begin to decline.

The SVOD-attributed success of series like *Breaking Bad* and *Sons of Anarchy*, which appeared on Netflix without network branding, perhaps points to the limited value of network brand identities in the digital television ecosystem dominated by SVODs. When asked about industry concerns that Netflix viewers make no association between programs like *Breaking Bad* and AMC, Netflix's Sarandos responded,

> You see that over and over again. I'm sure more people watch *Portlandia* on Netflix than ever see it on IFC. And that's not the intent. The intent is that it builds their show's brand, which it does help. And they inch up their audience a little bit every time on the network. But for most people that's a Netflix experience, not an IFC or an AMC experience. (Sepinwall, 2016)

This characterization is particularly significant as *Portlandia* appears with IFC network branding on Netflix's interface. Executives at Amazon have similarly hinted at the limited value of network brands. According to Paull,

> Customers trust brands to bring them great shows, but people are leaning more and more toward the shows and movies. From our experience when we lean into the shows, people are more likely to watch them. We're trying to promote the programming that they're likely to watch based on the data that we have. (Porch, 2016)

Based on such comments, it seems like SVODs are using individual shows to bring in many niche audiences as a means of replicating mass audiences with little regard for network brand identities much in the same way that media conglomerates have used television networks since the 1990s.

Conclusion

In the broadest sense, the relationships between SVODs and the brand identities of traditional networks in the US domestic market confirm what media scholars have long claimed about the transitions between old and new media. New media forms do not replace old ones. Rather, the interplay of old and new is an ongoing negotiation between established and emerging practices. However, what this means for the future of branded TV content and the future of television branding itself remains unclear. Amazon's ability to forge symbiotic relationships with networks and craft their service around well-established TV brand identities must be understood in relation to the company's broader commercial interests. Prime Video exists to lure customers to Amazon's e-commerce business. At the moment, it seems like branded content is serving this broader purpose. Yet, as Amazon spends more on original content and becomes less reliant on licensed content, established TV brands might well become increasingly marginal for Amazon's marketing and programming strategies.

If Netflix remains the most dominant player in the streaming video market, the company's marketing strategies will almost certainly redefine the ways in which branding continues to be television's defining industrial practice. Despite spending a significant portion of its US$6b content budget on original programming, Netflix is uninterested in building a distinctive brand identity around its original content as cable networks like HBO and MTV have done. In addition, Netflix's practice of selling individual shows to foreign markets (as happened with *House of Cards*) was made irrelevant by the company's international expansion last year. Consequently, the ability of any single program to become the product most valued by consumers as part of a program-as-brand strategy is severely constrained if Netflix 'Originals' are only available through the company's platform. As it stands now, Netflix's portal-as-brand strategy relegates traditional television-branding practices to the margins and there is little indication this will change in the near future.

Moving forward, future research might fruitfully consider the relationships between SVOD services and TV branding practices within transnational contexts. Beyond international distribution agreements that limit or expand SVOD libraries in a given territory, the value of American cable network brand identities, for example, is doubtlessly shaped by a wide-ranging variety of factors like cultural norms and preexisting distribution agreements with national providers. Similarly, as non-US-based content producers continue to sell international distribution rights to SVODs, producers like Israeli satellite provider Yes could begin demanding pre-roll promotion and other branding for its series *Fauda*, which is currently being distributed by Netflix, as part of a broader effort to build a global brand. By focusing on the transnational flow of branded television content within the distribution channels of SVOD services, media scholarship might be better able to understand the ways in which emerging portal-as-brand strategies are being shaped by the global flow of digital media and the global aspirations of national content producers.

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