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### **Position Paper: Television's Post-Network Promotional Strategies**

What is happening to television's promotional forms in a post-network era? As the medium adapts to a multi-platform future, how are alternative distribution and online delivery impacting the way programs are presented as part of a station or network's offerings? What are the implications of these changes for television audiences?

*Gossip Girl* has created a new paradigm for television shows. Although its Nielsen ratings are paltry, *Gossip Girl* is popular by new measurements including viewing via DVR, legal streaming and downloading, as well as the less measurable viewing parties and illegal file sharing, along with discussion boards and press and blog "buzz" including behind the scenes gossip that echoes the relationships of the characters. After the Writers' strike of 2008 interrupted momentum, and cost it press coverage, the network chose not to put it online, to find that ratings changed very little. The popularity of this program shows that audiences today no longer respond to traditional tactics, and that groups like young women and gay men have power and influence that other networks have not acknowledged. How many people are being undercounted through traditional ratings, and how many shows that truly are "popular" are being canceled? Conversely, how many shows that only a select grouping of Midwestern families actually likes are gaining top ratings and staying on for years? If we could figure out how to factor in the illegal file sharing and less easily searchable websites hosting shows underground, would that change the calculus? And as product placement becomes ubiquitous, is there significantly less value to the networks when views watch the shows away from ads?

Whether a show goes online and what form it takes is completely idiosyncratic. At least at first, it seemed that the most popular shows would be sold for around \$1.99 per episode, but less popular shows would be streamed. However, that does not seem to be the case as, following NBC's rift with iTunes, Hulu.com has been streaming most of NBC's offerings and other programming, including classic shows. Those shows stay up for at least the season, while ABC's, for example, stay up for a week or two only. The sites also differ in whether or not a separate player is required, and the form of the advertising. On iTunes, some shows are available by the episode, while other can only be ordered by the whole season. So far, the advertising tends to be minimal, with only one commercial per break, and each 30 seconds or less. So far it seems a fair exchange, even for someone like me who finds \$13/month for TiVo (and a corresponding amount for satellite radio) to be a totally fair exchange for avoiding commercials, but how long will this state of affairs last? Will consumers become frustrated and push for consolidation? Will the September 9, 2008 announcement that NBC shows are back on iTunes make fewer shows available for free?

At the same time, the programming available online at any time varies from minute to minute, and new web sites pop up daily, which affects me more as an educator than as a

viewer. As I developed my first online course in Television and Culture over the past few months, for delivery starting in September of 2008, content was a moving target. When I started it was easy to make a link to “Lucy Does a Commercial” (i.e. the Vitameatavegemin episode), a text I felt fundamental for my students, but two days before the course went “live” it was unavailable for free and the site that could have linked it for \$1.99 somewhere steadfastly refused to do so, leaving only a 9 minute clip on YouTube. The commonly accepted *Mary Tyler Moore* show episode “Chuckles Bites the Dust” a seventh season episode, is unavailable, even on DVD, but there is a hacked up version on YouTube—is it better to link to that, or choose the second funniest episode (available on DVD but not online), or some less funny episode of a show that was generally funny nearly all the time? If I can find the *Frasier* episode that perfectly illustrates the point I’d like to make about social class only on the Chinese version of YouTube (but uncut), should I do so?

*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and other classic television have been eased out of even networks like Nick at Nite in favor of programming for “the young.” Will everything eventually be available online for free? Will this turn actual television into a space designed only for those over 45 or those under 20? Or will we all be targeted by websites particularly calibrated to our ages, genders, races and interests, and watch the programming we find there?

### **Works Consulted**

Apple ends beef with NBC over iTunes shows. Associated Press. September 9, 2008.  
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