"Branded Entertainment": Digital Advertising and New TV Business Models

Sponsors, Past and Present, and the Problem of Cultural Legitimacy
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Television's recent "cultural legitimation," argue Elana Levine and Michael Z. Newman, has been enabled in part by technologies that allow audiences to watch without commercial interruptions, and have thus caused a gradual "de-commercialization" of television.[i] In response, advertisers ("brands") have increased their efforts to integrate brands into programs, even creating programming themselves. The textual distinctions between "program" and "commercial" are blurring: Is Chipotle's *Farmed and Dangerous,* a series that "explores the outrageously twisted world of industrial agriculture," a program or a commercial or a new category altogether? The resurgence of advertiser involvement in programming raises the specter of the return of the controlling, narrow-minded sponsor of eras past, potentially undermining the legitimation process. As legacy program producers compete with upstart producers, who may be more flexible in their dealings with brands, [ii] will audiences view branded entertainment as a culturally legitimate form of television?

During the single sponsorship era of broadcasting (late 1920s to mid 1960s), advertisers and their agencies selected programs, chose time slots, wrote scripts, cast talent, and integrated brand messages into those programs. Although sponsors were often depicted as crass, dictatorial debasers of culture,[iii] many sought to serve what they defined as the public interest by sponsoring classical music and theater, hoping to educate audiences in highbrow culture and gain their gratitude. When such advertisers were forced out of program control in the late 1950s-early 1960s, they viewed the networks' program strategies as a devolution into commercialism: highbrow single-sponsored programs such as *US Steel Hour* and *The Voice of Firestone* gave way to sitcoms and Westerns. Such network-controlled programs, mere bait for interruptive commercials, lacked cultural legitimacy.

Although it may seem incongruous to imagine advertisers as protectors of cultural legitimacy, advertisers today are likewise seeking paths to audience acceptance. No longer paternalistically concerned with educating audiences' tastes, advertisers today are interested aligning those tastes, whatever they are, with their brands. Having shifted from a belief in consumer manipulability to a belief in consumer sovereignty, advertisers today are anxious to appeal to audiences with content that is "authentic"; in other words, content that audiences perceive as serving their interests rather than the advertisers'.[iv] Rather than forcibly expose audiences to textually distinct ads, risking their inattention, advertisers hope to elevate their branded entertainment into a culturally legitimate form.

Advertisers' increased willingness to fund content directly, if only to enjoy a "halo" effect through association with popular programs or stars, may also signal new opportunities for content creators.[v] Unlike the dictatorial, paternalistic sponsors of previous eras, some advertisers today may support producers' authorial integrity and artistic vision as a means of claiming cultural legitimacy.[vi] The advertising industry includes strong proponents of the romantic ideology of authentic art,[vii] who tend to believe that audience distrust of traditional advertising has undermined its effectiveness. However, a too subtle brand integration may leave the advertiser with no discernable benefit. For example, hoping to avoid obvious brand integrations or the appearance of sponsor control, Ford has sponsored a series about *other* companies, *[This Built America](#)*. The subtler approach does provide a better chance that the content will be perceived as culturally legitimate. But there is no formula for winning audience acceptance while conveying brand messages. As a BBDO ad executive explained the problem back in 1961, "Making peace between commercial interests and cultural desires is not an easy task."[viii]

[i] Elana Levine and Michael Z. Newman *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012), ch. 7.

[ii] Melita Kubaras, "Producers Talk Brand Integration at TO Webfest," *Stream Daily*, May 12, 2104. http://streamdaily.tv/2014/05/12/producers-talk-brand-integration-at-to-webfest/

[iii] See for example the films, *Letter to Three Wives* (1949) or *The Hucksters* (1947).

[iv] David Lang, Chief Content Officer, remarks at 2014 Media Summit, March 5, 2014, New York City.

[v] Celine Roque, "Should Brands Spend Millions to Underwrite Other People's Content?" *Contently*, May 12, 2014. http://contently.com/strategist/2014/05/12/should-brands-spend-millions-to-underwrite-other-peoples-content/

[vi] Stuart Elliott, "Lure of Branded Entertainment Gives Rise to a Bicoastal Effort," *New York Times,* October 25, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/business/media/brooklyn-brothers-agency-aligns-with-hollywood-writers-and-producers.html?_r=3&ref=media&

[vii] Cynthia Meyers, "The Pitch: Creativity in Advertising," *Antenna*, May 14, 2012. http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2012/05/14/the-pitch-creativity-in-advertising/

[viii] BBDO *Newsletter*, September 1961, 3.