2015

Media Centered--"I want my... uhm TV?!

Winifred Fordham Metz
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, freddie@email.unc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7097

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
Video Killed the Radio Star

When MTV chose to broadcast the Buggles' 1979 hit song "Video Killed the Radio Star" as their first music video when the station went live in 1981, they seemed to be sending themselves up and giving a bit of credence to the concern of many at the time over the installation of a strictly music TV station. Interestingly, the same fuss had been made some 30 years prior, when television truly co-opted the radio star for its own — moving Molly Goldberg and her popular situational comedy cast from their radio broadcast to a visual version shown on CBS. This spawned numerous shows in its likeness — and continues today with what we know to be a sitcom. As with those first sitcoms, MTV became an overnight hit and paved the way for a number of similar TV stations and a host of new original programming centered on the MTV generation. Fast-forward another 30-some years and the Buggles' tune fairly apt — this time the lyrics might go "Netflix killed the television star" inciting similar concerns about a particular media's impending demise. Where Radio undoubtedly survived the advent of TV and MTV, today's media delivery landscape is changing way more drastically and rapidly than ever before, and cable companies and content producers are engaged in an active battle over this new terrain. And now where does that leave TV?

Beyond the Box: Cord Cutters, Untethered Masses, and the like...

Bundling and selling content to subscribers (typically households) has been around in some fashion since the first cable companies sprang up in the early 1950s. And either via cable or satellite, American households have been moderately steadily monthly subscribers (sustaining an average of 50% or more of reporting U.S. households) through the years with only a marked decline noted within the last decade. Bundling commonly entailed companies like Comcast, Cox Communications, or Time Warner approaching content producers (studios) and gathering a variety of their original programming, which they then packaged into multiple-channel selections and offer with a host of other programs for a monthly fee. Now, streaming technology has significantly changed this landscape. For almost a century, families could be counted on to gather around their radios and televisions at home to enjoy evening programming, be it radio and then cable, satellite, or local TV broadcast — but today’s technology (DVRs, video-on-demand, etc.) has increasingly enabled them to control their consumption, catch up on a show when they have time, or binge-watch an entire series in one go. Further still, streaming media enables viewers to untether themselves altogether from traditional cable, cut the cord on box TV, and co-opt visual real estate on their computers, tablets, phones, and other personal media devices. Services like Netflix, Hulu, Vimeo, and YouTube have made it entirely possible for consumers to constantly curate their own content — anything to retain current viewers, lure new subscribers, and ensure some purchase in the market, producers and cable companies alike have invested heavily in creating highly produced original programming. Many attribute this to the bringing back of the golden age of television with shows like HBO's Girls, True Detective, The Veep, and Game of Thrones, or Netflix's Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, Orange is the New Black, and House of Cards. And, as many of these are served up online, the notion of home entertainment has become a moving target, as consumers have progressed well beyond curating their own content to being able to choose where and when to consume it as well. According to Leichtman Research Group, cable providers reported more broadband subscribers than cable TV subscribers at the end of 2014.) This level of consumer control has engendered an expectation that is out of step with the traditional cable model. Consumer complaints and a collective call for unbundling have peppered social media, blogs, and columns for a few years now, and it seems content producers have been listening.
Borrowing from Netflix’s model, HBO began testing the water by offering their GO service to affiliated cable subscribers, allowing them to access HBO programming (read — *Game of Thrones*) via streaming boxes or on their portable media. But, this did not address the non-cable subscriber’s demand, so HBO cut the cord / broke the box and rolled out their NOW service. A monthly fee of $14.99 provides consumers without cable subscriptions ample HBO premium programming. Add this to Netflix’s already hugely popular streaming service, Nickelodeon’s digital subscription package, Sundance Now and their new Sundance Doc Club, CBS/Showtime’s soon-to-be-released direct digital service, NBC’s plan to offer a subscription Web-based comedy service, Verizon Communications’ FiOS custom TV’s slim package service, and Dish Network’s digital Sling TV package, and consumers now have a plethora of a la carte programming options from which to choose sans traditional cable. But what does that really mean? Instead of paying for both cable subscriptions packages and broadband access, will folks now just pay higher rates for more and faster broadband alongside these direct-to-viewer subscriptions? Is that really so different? Will there be a noticeable price reduction? Time may tell. But for now, it seems like more of a shift than a true change. And that brings me back to what impact this might have on media collections at our academic institutions, public libraries, and cultural centers.

*Maybe Netflix has [actually] Revived the TV Star…*

I have mentioned in previous articles that free streaming sites and subscription services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Snag, Vudu, Crackle, and now HBOGO, HBO Now, Showtime Anytime, Starz Play, Verizon’s FiOS, and Dish’s Sling TV can prove helpful resources. But they do not offer everything. Students and faculty are letting us know that they are not finding all the materials they need for their classes on these sites. They experience best success when they use them in tandem with the Library’s media collection. As assigned viewing continues to increase, so does the importance of our locally curated collection of media materials. This absolutely includes TV. Maybe not TV as we have understood it to be, but certainly the programs lending themselves to the renascent golden age of TV we are experiencing today through the original programming being produced by Netflix, HBO, Showtime, AMC, FX, and IFC alongside traditional networks like ABC, NBC, and CBS. Our media collections currently include classic and essential TV shows from most every decade since Molly Goldberg shouted “Yoohoo” from her kitchen window. Undoubtedly, these collections reflect an ever-increasing roster of shows produced by cable networks like HBO and Showtime or online video outlets like Netflix. TV continues to resonate in the curriculum. Classes once dedicated to analyzing and deconstructing episodes of *M*A*S*H, All in the Family, Seinfeld,* and *The Simpsons* moved on to *The Wire, Sex and the City, The Sopranos,* and *Breaking Bad* and have now arrived at *Girls, Game of Thrones, Empire,* and *Mad Men.* Now more than ever, careful curation of our TV show collections must continue as the landscape continues to grow and change. As Don Draper from *Mad Men* recently asserted in the final season — “This is the beginning of something, not the end.”

*Some Shows to Consider (besides the obvious ones like Game of Thrones, Orange is the New Black, and Girls…)*