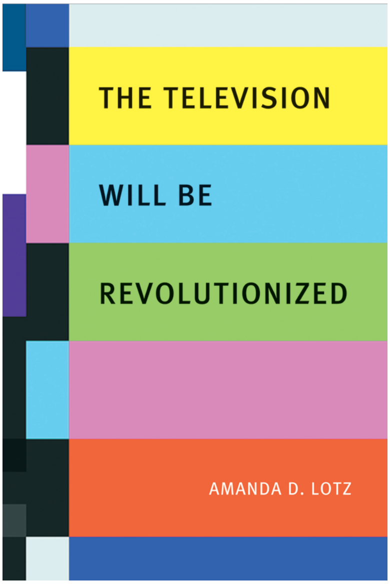

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Introduction

As I was dashing through an airport in November of 2001, the cover of *Technology Review* displayed on a newsstand rack caught my eye. Its cover announced "The Future of Television," and the inside pages provided a smart look at coming changes.[1] Even by the end of 2001, which was still long before viewers or television executives truly imagined the reality of downloading television shows to pocket-sized devices or streaming video online, it was apparent that the box that had sat in our homes for half a century was on the verge of significant change. The future that author Mark Fischetti foresaw in the article depicts my current television world fairly accurately, although I am admittedly an early adopter of television gear and gadgetry and there are still some aspects of this world beyond my reach. And right there in his third paragraph is the sentiment that television and consumer electronics executives uttered incessantly in 2006 as the mantra of the television future: "whatever show you want, whenever you want, on whatever screen you want."

But even though Fischetti presciently anticipated the substantial adjustments in how we view television, where we view it, how we pay for it, and how the industry would remain viable and vital, many other headlines in the intervening years have predicted a far different situation. A 2006 IBM Business Consulting Services Report announced "The End of Television As We Know It," and an otherwise sharp *Slate.com* article proclaimed "The Death of Television"; a *Business Week* article explained "Why TV Will Never Be the Same," and the *Wall Street Journal* opined on "How Old Media Can Survive in a New World."[2] By 2007, a *Wired* article better captured the contradictions emerging with the title "The TV Is Dead. Long Live the TV."[3] Predicting the coming death of television seemed to become a new beat for many of the nation's technology and culture writers in the mid-2000s.

The journalists weren't alone in their uncertainty about the future of television or even what television was, as new ways to use television and new forms of content confounded even those who used the device everyday. In 2004, a student relayed a conversation with a colleague in which this colleague told her that he did not own a TV. The student knew my colleague's child enjoyed an expansive video collection, and it seemed unlikely that he could have tossed out the set and videos without good reason. So she asked, incredulously, why had he thrown away the set? He looked at her with confusion and responded that he still had the set, but he made plain that his family doesn't watch TV; they watch videos. She wondered aloud in my office, "But they do watch the videos on a television?" Her story reminded me of an anecdote that Rich Frank, a longtime broadcast television executive, told a Las Vegas ballroom full of television executives a few weeks earlier. Frank shared that he had recently visited with his young grandson and asked the boy which network was his favorite. Frank expected to hear a broadcast network or perhaps Nickelodeon in response, but what the boy replied, without a moment's hesitation, was "TiVo." Now clearly, if young children watch videos without watching television and believe TiVo is a channel, then either the future of television has arrived or we are well on our way.

We may continue to watch television, but the new technologies available to us require new rituals of use. Not so long ago, television use typically involved walking into a room, turning on the set, and either turning to specific content or channel surfing. Today, viewers with digital video recorders (DVRs) such as TiVo may elect to circumvent scheduling constraints and commercials. Owners of portable viewing devices download the latest episodes of their favorite shows and watch them outside the conventional setting of the living room. Still others rent television shows on DVD, or download them through legal and illegal sources online. And this doesn't even begin to touch upon the viewer-created television that appears on video aggregators such as YouTube or social networking sites. As a result of these changing technologies and modes of viewing, the nature of television use has become increasingly complicated, deliberate, and individualized. Television as we knew it—understood as a mass medium capable of reaching a broad, heterogeneous audience and speaking to the culture as a whole—is no longer the norm in the United States. But changes in what we can do with television, what we expect from it, and how we use it have not been hastening the demise of the medium. Instead, they are revolutionizing it.

This book offers a detailed and exhaustive behind-the-screen exploration of the substantial changes occurring in television technology, program creation, distribution, and advertising, why these practices have changed, and how these changes are profoundly affecting everyone from television viewers to those who study and work in the industry. It examines a wide range of industrial practices common in U.S. television and assesses their recent evolution in order to explain how and why the images and stories we watch on television find their way to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These changes are so revolutionary that they have initiated a new era of television, the effects of which we are only beginning to detect.

What Is Television Today?

Television is not just a simple technology or appliance—like a toaster—that has sat in our homes for more than fifty years. Rather, it functions both as a technology and a tool for cultural storytelling. We know it as a sort of "window on the world" or a "cultural hearth" that has gathered our families, told us stories, and offered glimpses of a world outside our daily experience. It brought the nation together to view Lucy's antics, gave us mouthpieces to discuss our uncertainties about social change though Archie and Meathead, and provided a common gathering place through which a geographically vast nation could share in watching national triumphs and tragedies. A certain understanding of what television was and could be developed during our early years with the medium and resulted from the specific industrial practices that organized television production processes for much of its history. Alterations in the production process—the practices involved in the creation and circulation of television—including how producers make television programs, how networks finance them, and how audiences access them, have created new ways of using television and now challenge our basic understanding of the medium. Changes in television have forced the production process to evolve during the past twenty years so that the assorted ways we now use television are mirrored in and enabled by greater variation in the ways television is made, financed, and distributed.

We might rarely consider the business of television, but production practices inordinately affect the stories, images, and ideas that project into our homes. Consequently, the industrial transformation of U.S. television has begun to modify what the industry creates. Industrial processes are normally nearly unalterable and support deeply entrenched structures of power that determine what stories can be told and which viewers matter most. But from 1985 through 2005, the U.S. television industry reinvented itself and its industrial practices to compete in the digital era by breaking from customary norms of program acquisition, financing, and advertiser support that in many cases had been in place since the mid-1950s. This period of transition created great instability in the relationships among producers and consumers, networks and advertisers, and technology companies and content creators, which in turn initiated uncommon opportunities to deviate from the "conventional wisdom" or industry lore that ruled television operations. Industry workers faced a changing competitive environment triggered by the development of new and converging technologies that expanded ways to watch and receive television; they also found audiences willing to explore the innovative opportunities these new technologies provided.

Rather than enhancing existing business models, industrial practices, and viewing norms, recent technological innovations have engendered new ones—but it is not just new technologies that have revolutionized the television industry. Adjustments in how studios finance, make, and distribute shows, as well as in how and where viewers watch them occurred simultaneously. None of these developments suggested that television would play a diminished role in the lives of the nation that spends the most time engaging its programming, but the evolving institutional, economic, and technological adjustments of the industry have come to have significant implications for the role of television in society. In the mid-2000s, the industry was on the verge of rapid and radical change as the television transformation moved from a few early adopters to a more general and mass audience. Likewise, as new uses became dominant and shared by more viewers, television's role in culture underwent changes. Understanding these related changes is of crucial interest to all who watch television and think about how it communicates ideas, to those who study media, and to those who are trying to keep abreast of their rapidly evolving businesses and remain up-to-date with new commercial processes.

Despite changing industrial practices, television remains a ubiquitous media form and a technology widely owned and used in the United States and many similarly industrialized nations. Yet the vast expansion in the number of networks and channels streaming through our televisions and the varied ways we can now access content has diminished the degree to which any society encounters television viewing as a shared event. Although once the norm, society-wide viewing of particular programs is now an uncommon experience. New technologies have both liberated the place-based and domestic nature of television use and freed viewers to control when and where they view programs. Related shifts in distribution possibilities that allow us to watch television on computer screens and mobile phones have multiplied previously standard models for financing shows and profiting from them, thereby creating a vast expansion in economically viable content. Viewers face more content choices, more options in how and when to view programs, and more alternatives for paying for their programming. Increasingly, they have even come to enjoy the opportunity to create it themselves.

Thus, although television remains a mass medium that can in principle always be capable of serving as the cultural hearth around which a society shares media events—as we did in cases such as the Kennedy assassination or Challenger explosion—it increasingly exists as an electronic newsstand through which a diverse and segmented society pursues deliberately targeted interests. The U.S. television audience now can rarely be categorized as a mass audience; instead, it is more accurately understood as a collection of niche audiences. Although television has been reconfigured in recent decades as a medium that most commonly addresses fragmented and specialized audience groups, no technology emerged to replace its previous norm as a messenger to a mass and heterogeneous audience. The development and availability of the Internet substantially affected the circulation of ideas and enabled distribution to even international audiences, yet the Internet allows us to attend to even more diverse content and provides little commonality in experience. Television's transition to a narrowcast medium—one targeted to distinct and isolated subsections of the audience—along with adjustments within the broader media culture in which it exists, significantly altered its industrial logic and has required a fundamental reassessment of how it operates as a cultural institution.

For the last fifty years we have thought about television in certain ways because of how television has been, but the truth is that television has not operated in the way we have assumed for some time now. Few of the norms of television that held from the 1950s into the 1980s remain in place, and such norms were already themselves the results of specific industrial, technological, and cultural contexts. In particular, the presumption that television predominately functions as a mass medium continues to hold great sway, but the mass audiences once characteristic of television were, as media scholar Michael Curtin notes, an aberration resulting from Fordist principles of "mass production, mass marketing and mass consumption."[4] Consequently, previous norms did not suggest the "proper" functioning of the television industry more than did subsequent norms; rather, they resulted from a specific industrial, technological, and cultural context no more innate than those that would develop later.

Understanding the transitions occurring in U.S. television at this time is a curious matter relative to conventional approaches to exploring technology and culture. Historically, technological innovation primarily has been a story of replacement in which a new technology emerged and subsumed the role of the previous technology. This indeed was the case of the transition from radio to television—as television neatly adopted many of the social and cultural functions of radio and added pictures to correspond with the sounds of the previous medium. The supplanted medium did not fade away, but repositioned itself and redefined its primary attributes to serve a complementary more than competitive function. But it is not a new competitor that now threatens television; it is the medium itself.

The changes in television that have taken place over the past two decades—whether the gross abundance of channel and program options we now select among or our increasing ability to control when and where we watch—are extraordinary and on the scale of the transition from one medium to another, as in the case of the shift from radio to television. And it is not just television that has changed. The field of media in which television is integrated also has evolved profoundly—most directly as a result of digital innovation and the audience's experiences with computing. Various industrial, technological, and cultural forces have begun to radically redefine television, and yet paradoxically, it persists as an entity most still understand and identify as "TV."

This book explores this redefinition of television specifically in the United States, although these changes are also redefining the experience with television in similar ways in many countries around the world. From its beginning, broadcasting has been "ideally suited" technologically to transgress national borders and constructs such as nation-states; however, the early imposition of strict national control and substantially divergent national experiences prevailed over attributes innate to the technology.[5] Many different countries experienced similar transitions in their industrial composition, production processes, and use of this thing called television at the same time as the United States, but precise situations diverge enough to make it difficult to speak in transnational generalities and lead to my focus on only the U.S. experience of this transition. The specific form of the redefinition—as it emerges from a rupture in dominant industrial practices—is particular to each nation, yet similarly industrialized countries shared in experiencing the transition to digital transmission, the expansion of choice in channel and content options, the increasing conglomeration of the industry among a few global behemoths, and the drive for increased control over when, where, and how audiences viewed "television programs." The development of an increasingly global cultural economy also has integrated the fate and fortune of the television industry beyond national confines.

Situating Television Circa 2005

During its first forty years, U.S. television remained fairly static in its industrial practices. It maintained modes of production, a standard picture quality, and conventions of genre and schedule, all of which led to a common and regular experience for audiences and lulled those who think about television into certain assumptions. Moments of adjustment occurred, particularly at the end of the 1950s when the "magazine" style of advertising began to take over and networks gained control of their schedules from advertising agencies and sponsors, but once established, the medium remained relatively unchanged until the mid 1980s. First, the "network era" (from approximately 1952 through the mid-1980s) governed industry operations and allowed for a certain experience with television that characterizes much of the medium's history. The norms of the network era have persisted in the minds of many as distinctive of television, despite the significant changes that have developed over the past twenty years. I therefore identify the period of the mid-1980s through the mid-2000s as that of the "multi-channel transition." During these years various developments changed our experience with television, but did so very gradually—in a manner that allowed the industry to continue to operate in much the same way as it did in the network era. The final period, the "post-network era," begins in the mid-2000s and is certainly not complete as this book goes to press. What separates the post-network era from the multi-channel transition is that the changes in competitive norms and operation of the industry have become too pronounced for old practices to be preserved; different industrial practices are becoming dominant and replacing those of the network era.

These demarcations in time, which are intentionally general, recognize that all production processes do not shift simultaneously and that people adopt new technologies and ways of using them at varied paces. By the end of 2005, adjustments in how people could access programming enabled a small group of early adopters to experience television in a manner characteristic of the post-network era.[6] Change of this scale is necessarily gradual. Even as I made final edits to this manuscript in early 2007, it still remained impossible to assert that a majority of the audience had entered the post-network era or that all production processes had "completed" the transition, but the eventual dominance of post-network conditions does appear to be inevitable.

The characteristics of the three phases of television, summarized in Table 1, are reviewed below.

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Production Components in Each Period

Production Component	*Network Era*	*Multi-Channel Transition*	*Post-Network Era*
Technology	Television	VCR Remote control Analog cable	DVR, VOD Portable devices (iPod, PSP) Mobile phones Slingbox Digital Cable
Creation	Deficit financing	Fin-syn rules, surge of independents, end of fin-syn conglomeration and co-production	Multiple financing norms, variation in cost structure and aftermarket value; opportunities for amateur production
Distribution	Bottleneck, definite windows, exclusivity	Cable increases possible outlets	Erosion of time between windows, and exclusivity; content anytime, anywhere
Advertising	:30 ads, upfront market	Subscription, experimentation with alternatives to :30 ads	Co-existence of multiple models—:30, placement, integration, branded entertainment, sponsorship; multiple user supported-transactional and subscription
Audience Measurement	Audimeters, diaries, sampling	People Meters, sampling	Portable People Meters, census measure

The Network Era

The series of fits and starts through which U.S. television developed complicates the determination of a clear beginning of the network era. Early television unquestionably evolved from the network organization of radio. This provides a compelling argument for dating the network era to the first television broadcasts of the late 1940s, if not to the days of radio. Alternatively, the industrial conditions of early television enabled substantial local production and innovation, which made these early years uncharacteristic of what developed in the early through the mid-1950s and became the network-era norm. Dating the network era as beginning in 1952 takes into account the passage of the channel allocation freeze (during which the FCC organized its practice of frequency distribution), color television standard adoption, and other institutional aspects that regularized the network experience for much of the country.[7]

Television certainly began as a network-organized medium, but many of the industrial practices and modes of organization that eventually defined the network era were not established immediately. By the early 1960s, network-era conventions were more fully in operation: the television set (and for some, an antenna) provided the extent of necessary technology; competition was primarily limited to programming supplied to local affiliates by three national networks that dictated production terms with studios; the networks offered the only outlets for high-budget original programming; thirty-second advertisements—the majority of which were sold in packages before the beginning of the season—supplied the dominant form of economic support and were premised upon rudimentary information about audience size; and audiences, which exercised no control over when they could view particular programs, chose among few, undifferentiated programming options.

The network era of U.S. television was the provenance of three substantial networks—NBC, CBS, and ABC—which were operated by relatively non-conglomerated corporations based in the business center of New York. These networks were organized hierarchically with many layers of managers, and each was administered by a figurehead with whom the identity and vision of the network could be identified.[8] Established first in radio, the networks spoke to the country en masse and played a significant role in articulating post-war American identity.[9] Networking was economically necessary because of the cost of production and the need to amortize costs across national audiences. Achieving economies of scale, networking recouped the tremendous costs of creating television programming by producing one show, distributing it to audiences nationwide, and selling advertising that would reach that massive national audience. Gathering mass audiences through a system of national network affiliates enabled networks to afford "network quality" programming with which independent and educational stations could not compete.

The financial relationships between networks and the production companies that supplied most television programming have changed throughout the history of television, but the dominant practices of the network era were established by the mid-1960s. Film studios and independent television producers had only three potential buyers of their content and were thus compelled to abide by practices established by the networks. In many cases the networks forced producers to shoulder significant risk while offering limited reward through a system in which the producers financed the complete cost of production and received license fees (payments from the networks) often 20 percent less than costs. Studios also sold the programs to international buyers or in syndication to affiliates after the program had aired on a network, but the networks typically demanded a percentage of these revenues, as detailed in Chapter 3.

The conventions of advertising and program creation were multifaceted in television's early years. As was the case in radio, much early television featured a single sponsor for each program—as in the *Texaco Star Theater*—rather than the purchase of commercials by multiple corporations, a practice that later became standard. The networks eliminated the single sponsorship format, thereby wresting substantial control of their schedule away from advertising agencies and sponsors, only in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The earlier norm eroded precipitously in part as a result of the quiz show scandals that revealed advertisers' willingness to mislead audiences, but as explored in Chapter 5, this erosion also had much to do with adjustments in how the networks sought to operate, as well as with differences in the demands of television relative to radio. After the elimination of the single sponsorship format, networks earned revenue from various advertisers who paid for thirty-second commercials embedded at regular intervals within programs in the manner that is still common today. Advertisers made their purchases based on network guarantees of reaching a certain audience, although many of the methods used to determine the size and composition of the audience were very limited.

Viewers had comparatively few ways to use their televisions during the network era. Most selected among fewer than a handful of options and optimally chose among three nationally distributed networks, inconsistently dispersed independent stations, and the isolated and under-funded educational television stations that became a slow-growing and still under-funded public broadcasting system. As the name implies, in the network era, U.S. "television" meant the networks ABC, CBS, and NBC.

In addition to lacking choice, network-era viewers possessed little control over the medium. Channel surfing via remote control, an activity taken for granted by contemporary viewers, did not become an option for most until the beginning of the multi-channel transition—although, as established, there was little to surf among. Viewers possessed no recourse against network schedules, and time-shifting remained beyond the realm of possibility. If the PTA bake sale was scheduled for Thursday night, that week's visit with *The Waltons* could not be rescheduled or delayed.

In the network era, television was predominantly a non-portable, domestic medium, with most homes owning just one set. Even by 1970, only 32.2 percent of homes had more than one television.[10] Communication scholar James Webster distinguishes the characteristics of television in this era as that of an "old medium" in which television programming was uniform, uncorrelated with channels, and universally available.[11] Such basic characteristics of technological use and accessibility contributed to the programming strategies of the era in important ways. Network programmers knew that the whole family commonly viewed television together, and they consequently selected programs and designed a schedule likely to be acceptable to, although perhaps not most favored by, the widest range of viewers—a strategy CBS vice president of programming Paul Klein described as that of "least objectionable programming."[12] This was the era of *broad*casting in which networks selected programs that would reach a heterogeneous mass culture, but still directed their address to the white middle-class. This mandate was integral to the business design of the networks and led to a competitive strategy in which they did not attempt to significantly differentiate their programming or clearly brand themselves with distinctive identities, as is common today. The fairly uniform availability of the three broadcast networks in each market forced viewers nationwide to choose among the same limited options, and the variation between daytime and prime-time schedules indicated the extent of targeted viewing in this era of mass audiences.

The network era featured very specific terms of engagement for the audience regardless of the broader distinctions in how the industry created that programming or how the business of television operated. Viewers grew accustomed to arbitrary norms of practice—many of which were established in radio—such as a limited range of genres, certain types of programming scheduled at particular times of day, the television "season," and reruns. These unexceptional network-era conventions appeared "natural" and "just how television is" to such a degree that altering these norms seemed unimaginable. However, adjustments in the television industry during the multi-channel transition revealed the arbitrary quality of these practices and enabled critics, industry workers, and entrepreneurs to envision radically different possibilities for television.

As the arrival of technologies that provided television viewers with unprecedented choice and control initiated an end to the network era, the multi-channel transition profoundly altered the television experience. To be sure, many network-era practices remained dominant throughout the multi-channel transition, but during the twenty-year period that began in the mid-1980s and extended through the early years of the twenty-first century these practices were challenged to such a degree that their preeminent status eroded.

The Multi-Channel Transition

Beginning in the 1980s, the television industry experienced two decades of gradual change. New technologies including the remote control, video-cassette recorder, and analog cable systems expanded viewers' choice and control; producers adjusted to government regulations that forced the networks to relinquish some of their control over the terms of program creation;[13] nascent cable channels and new broadcast networks added to viewers' content choices and eroded the dominance of ABC, CBS, and NBC; subscription channels launched and introduced an advertising-free form of television programming; and methods for measuring audiences grew increasingly sophisticated with the deployment of Nielsen's People Meter. As in the network era, this constellation of industrial norms led to a particular viewer experience of television and enabled a certain range of programming. Many of these industrial practices are explored in greater depth in Chapters 2 through 6, which focus on explaining new norms emerging in production processes including technology, program creation, distribution, advertising, and audience measurement and how these norms adjusted the type of programming the industry creates. In introducing this distinction between the multi-channel transition and post-network era here, it is most helpful to first establish the difference in viewers' experience of television. The subsequent chapters then detail the modifications in industrial practices that introduced these changes for viewers.

The common television experience was altered primarily as a result of expanded choice and control introduced during the multi-channel transition. As competition arising from the creation of new broadcast networks, such as FOX (1986), The WB (1995) and UPN (1995), expanded viewing options, a rapidly growing array of cable channels also drew viewers away from broadcast networks—so much so that the combined broadcast share, the percentage of those watching television who watched broadcast networks, declined from 90 to 64 during the 1980s.[14] Moreover, despite the arrival of new broadcast competitors during the 1990s, viewers continued to switch their prime-time viewing to cable, although not at such a precipitous rate as before. Still, broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC, The WB, and UPN) collected an average of only 58 percent of those watching television at the conclusion of the 1999–2000 season, and only 46 percent by the end of the 2004–2005 season.[15] Alternative distribution systems such as cable and satellite enabled a new abundance of viewing options, and 56 percent of television households subscribed to them by 1990—a figure that grew to 85 percent of households by 2004.[16] And with homes receiving an average of 100 channels in 2003, up from 55 just two years earlier and 33 in 1990, the range of programming choices for viewers also grew considerably.[17]

The development of new technology that increased consumer control also facilitated viewers' break from the network-era television experience. Audiences first found this control in the form of the remote control devices (RCDs) that became standard in the 1980s. The dissemination of VCR technology further enabled them to select when to view content and to build personal libraries. For many, the availability of cable, remote control devices, and VCRs provided significant change all at once. The diffusion of these technologies was complexly interrelated. Viewers did not need to purchase a new remote-equipped set to gain use of an RCD. Many who acquired cable boxes and VCRs first accessed RCDs with these devices, while the new range of channels offered by cable and the control capabilities of VCRs expanded viewers' need for remotes.[18]

Substantial changes within the walls of the home also altered how audiences used television during the multi-channel transition. The limited options of the network era led programs to be widely viewed throughout the culture, but the explosion of content providers throughout the multichannel transition enabled viewers to increasingly isolate themselves in enclaves of specific interests. As Webster explains, "new media" provide programming that is diverse and is correlated with channels, and they make content differentially available.[19] For example, although many cable channels can be acquired nationwide, the varying carriage agreements and packaging of the channels by locally organized cable systems create different availability based on geography and subscription tier.

Webster argues that this programming multiplicity results in audience fragmentation and polarization.[20] While much of the concern within the industry about audience fragmentation focuses on the consequences of smaller audiences for the commercial financing system that supports U.S. television, cultural critics are now considering how the polarization of media audiences contributes to cultural fissures such as those that emerged around social issues in the 2000 and 2004 elections. Here, polarization refers to the ability of different groups of viewers to consume substantially different programming and ideas, rather than simply to the dispersal of audiences. New technologies contribute to this polarization in various ways; for example, control technologies, which enable audiences to view the same programs at different times, decrease the likelihood of viewers sharing content during a given period, while the new surplus of channels spreads the audience across an expansive range of programming.[21] Moreover, viewers' ability to use recording technologies to develop self-determined programming schedules also diminished the already languishing notion of television as an initiator of water-cooler conversation—a notion once enforced through the mandate of simultaneous viewing.

The emergence of so many new networks and channels changed the competitive dynamics of the industry and the type of programming likely to be produced. Instead of needing to design programming likely to be least objectionable to the entire family, broadcast networks—and particularly cable channels—increasingly developed programming that might be most satisfying to specific audience members. At first, this niche targeting remained fairly general with channels such as CNN seeking out those interested in news, ESPN attending to the sports audience, and MTV aiming at youth culture. As the number of cable channels grew, however, this targeting became more and more narrow. For example, by the early 2000s, three different cable channels specifically pursued women (Lifetime, Oxygen, and WE), yet developed clearly differentiated programming that might be "most satisfying" to women with divergent interests. These more narrowly targeted cable channels increased the range of stories that could be supported by an advertising-based medium. By the mid- to late 1990s, some cable channels built enough revenue to support the production of "broadcast quality" original series such as *La Femme Nikita* and *Any Day Now,* and their particular economic arrangements allowed them to schedule series with themes and content unlikely to be found on broadcast networks.[22] Their niche audience strategy and the supplementary income they gained from the fees paid by cable providers led cable channels to develop shows such as Lifetime's female-centered dramas *Any Day Now* and *Strong Medicine* or FX's edgy dramas *The Shield* and *Nip/Tuck* which have much more specific target audiences than those of broadcast series. The ability of cable channels to succeed with smaller audiences made broadcasters' mission difficult as viewers chose the most satisfying program over that which was least objectionable. Yet the cable channels were also simultaneously constrained by their much smaller audiences and related lower advertising prices.

Indications of a Post-Network Era

The choice and control that viewers gained during the multi-channel transition only continue to expand during the post-network era. Others (myself included) have previously used "post-network" to indicate the era in which cable channels created additional options for viewers—similar to the way I use the phrase "multi-channel transition" here. The term "post-network" is best reserved, however, as an indicator of more comprehensive changes in the medium's use. Here, "post-network" acknowledges the break from a dominant network-era experience in which viewers lacked much control over when and where to view and chose among a limited selection of externally determined linear viewing options—in other words, programs available at a certain time on a certain channel. Such constraints are not part of the post-network television experience in which viewers now increasingly select what, when, and where to view from abundant options. The post-network distinction is not meant to suggest the end or irrelevance of networks—just the erosion of their control over how and when viewers watch particular programs. In the early years of the post-network era, networks and channels have remained important sites of program aggregation, operating with distinctive identities that help viewers find content of interest.

Chapters 2 through 6 provide detailed considerations of the new industrial conditions that suggest that a post-network era is coming to be established. These conditions include emerging technologies that enable far greater control over when and where viewers watch programming; multiple options for financing television production that develop and expand the range of commercially viable programming; greater opportunities for amateur production that have arisen with and been augmented by a revolution in distribution that exponentially increases the ease of sharing video; various advertising strategies including product placement and integration that have come to co-exist with the decreasingly dominant thirty-second ad; and advances in digital technologies that further expand knowledge about audience viewing behaviors and create opportunities to supplement sampling methods with census data about use. Once again, adjustments in the production process change the use of television as viewers gain additional control capabilities and access to content variation. Additionally, other new technologies have expanded portable and mobile television use and have removed television from its domestic confines.

Unlike the fairly uniform experience of watching television in the network era, by the end of the multi-channel transition, there was no singular behavior or mode of viewing, and this variability has only increased in the post-network era. For example, research of early DVR adopters found that they sometimes engaged television through the previously dominant model of watching television live. However, at other times and with other types of programming they also exhibited an emergent behavior of using the device not only to seek out and record certain content but also to pause, skip, or otherwise self-determine how to view it. Control technologies have effectively added to viewers' choice in experiencing television, as they have enabled far more differentiated and individualized uses of the medium.

Two key non-television related factors also figure significantly in creating the changes in audience behaviors that characterize the post-network era: computing and generational shifts. The diffusion of personal computers relates to changing uses of television in significant ways. During the multi-channel transition, when viewers increasingly experienced television as one of many "screen" technologies in the home, the initial contrast between the experience of using computers and watching television led users to differentiate between screen media according to whether they required us to push or pull content, lean back or lean forward, and pursue leisure or work. Subsequently, however, digital technologies have come to dismantle these early differentiations and tendencies of use and have allowed for the previously unimagined integration of television and computers in the post-network era. This integration has occurred concomitantly with the growth in home computer ownership, which rose from 11 percent in 1985 to 30 percent in 1995 and reached equilibrium by 2003—growing only 2 percent by 2005 from 65 to 67 percent.[23] The technological experience of personal computing is important beyond the growing convergence of media in the latter part of the multi-channel transition era because of the new technological aptitudes and expectations embodied in computer users. The presumption that technologies "do" something useful and that we "do" something with them has played a significant role in adjusting network-era behavior with regard to television. New media theorist Dan Harries refers to the blending of old media *viewing* and new media *using* as "viewsing."[24] Thinking about such activities as being merged, rather than as being distinct, takes important steps beyond the binaries between computer and television technologies commonly assumed in the past and addresses the multiple modes of viewing and using that audiences began to exhibit by the end of the multi-channel transition.

Related generational differences have also played a key role in changing uses of television.[25] Many of the distinctions such as broadcast versus cable—let alone between television and computer—that have structured understandings of television are meaningless to those born after 1980. Most members of this generation (dubbed "Millennials" or "digital natives") never knew a world without cable, were introduced to the Internet before graduating from high school, and carried mobile phones with them from the time they were first allowed out in the world on their own.[26] The older edge of this generation provoked a new economic model in the recording industry through rampant illegal downloading, while their younger peers made their first music purchases from online single-song retailers such as Apple's iTunes.

Acculturated with a range of communication technologies from birth, this generation moves fluidly and fluently among technologies. Anne Sweeney, co-chair of Disney media networks and president of the Disney-ABC television group, recounted research in 2006 indicating that 40 percent of Millennials went home each evening and used five to eight technologies (many simultaneously), while 40 percent of their Boomer parents returned home and only watched television.[27] Similarly, a 2006 report by IBM Business Consulting Services emphasized the "bimodality" of television consumers in coming years. It predicted a "generational chasm" between "massive passives" who were mainly Boomers who retained network-era television behaviors, "gadgetiers" who were members of the middling Generation X who were not acculturated with new technologies from birth, but were more willing to experiment with them, and "kool kids," the Millennials.[28] Younger generations, who have approached television and technology in general with very different expectations than their predecessors, have also introduced new norms of use. For example, television scholar Jason Mittell reflects on the significance of the arrival of a DVR in his home at the same time as his first child, and notes that when she came to ask "what is on television?" the question referred to what shows might be stored on the hard drive, as she had no sense of the limited access to scheduled programming assumed by most others.[29] The widespread availability of control technologies provides a different experience for younger generations who may never associate networks with television viewing in the same manner as their antecedents. As the generation that came of age using television to watch videos and DVDs and to play video games becomes employed in the industry, it will enable even greater re-imagining of television content and use.

At a summit on "The Future of Television" sponsored by the trade publication *Television Week* in September 2004, all but one of the panelists used evidence drawn from observations of their children's approach to television as justification for their arguments about the new directions of the medium. In addition to their children not operating with a model of television organized by networks and linear schedules, the executives noted, with awe, the mediated multi-tasking that defined their children's television use. Research that continues to show growth in all media use supports these anecdotes. For example, as of 2007, time spent viewing television had not diminished despite continued expansion in time spent using the Internet; instead, multiple media have come to be simultaneously used. Generations who are growing up with computers and mobile phones are accustomed to using multiple technologies to achieve a desired end—whether to access information, find entertainment, or communicate with friends. Such comfort in moving across technologies, or what those in the industry refer to as "media agnosticism," has been crucial to the adoption of devices for watching television and ways of doing so that further facilitate the shift to the post-network era.

In sum, while features of a post-network era have come to be more apparent, such an era will be fully in place only once choice is no longer limited to program schedules and the majority of viewers use the opportunities new technologies and industrial practices make available. Post-network television is primarily non-linear rather than linear, and it could not be established until dominant network-era practices became so outmoded that the industry developed new practices in their place. The gradual adjustment in how viewers use television, and corresponding gradual shifts in production practices, have taken more than two decades to transpire, which is why I distinguish this intermediate period as the multi-channel transition. During this time, viewers experienced a marked increase in choice and achieved limited control over the viewing experience. But the post-network era allows them to choose among programs produced in any decade, by amateurs and professionals, and to watch this programming on demand and for viewing on main "living room" sets, computer screens, or portable devices.

And So, the Television Will Be Revolutionized

> The world as we knew it is over.
>
> —Les Moonves, President of CBS Television, 2003

> The 50-year-old economic model of this business is kind of history now.
>
> —Gail Berman, President of Entertainment, FOX, 2003[30]

These bold pronouncements by two of the U.S. television industry's most powerful executives only begin to suggest the scale of the transitions that took place as the multi-channel transition yielded to new industrial norms characteristic of a post-network era. Television executives commonly traffic in hyperbolic statements, but the assertions by Moonves and Berman did not overstate the case. Here they reflected on the substantial challenges to conventional production processes as a result of scheduling and financing the comparatively cheap, but widely viewed unscripted ("reality") television series. Yet, the issues brought to the fore by the success of unscripted formats offered only an indication of the broader forces that threatened to revise decades'-old business models and industrial practices.

A confluence of multiple industrial, technological, and cultural shifts conspired to alter institutional norms in a manner that fundamentally redefined the medium and the business of television. The U.S. television industry was a multifaceted and mature industry by the early years of the twenty-first century, when Moonves and Berman made these claims. As post-network adjustments became unavoidable, many executives expressed a sense that the sky was falling—and indeed, the scale of changes affecting all segments of the industry gave reasonable cause for this outlook. A single or simple cause did not initiate this comprehensive industrial reconfiguration, so there was no one to blame and no way to stop it.

An important harbinger of the arrival or near arrival of the post-network era occurred in mid-2004 when the rhetoric of industry leaders shifted from advocating efforts to prevent change to accepting the inevitability of industrial adjustment. This acceptance marked a transition from corporate strategies that sought to erect walls around content and retard the availability of more personalized applications of television technology to efforts to enable content from traditional providers to travel beyond the linear network platform.[31] In his detailed history of the invention of media technologies, Brian Winston illustrates how existing industries have repeatedly suppressed the radical potential of new technologies in an effort to prevent them from disrupting established economic interests. Unsurprisingly, the patterns Winston identifies also appear in the television industry, in which "supervening social necessities" led inventors to create technologies that provided markedly new capabilities, while those with business interests threatened by the new inventions sought to curtail and constrain user access.[32] Nonetheless, many of the conventional practices and even the industry's basic business model proved unworkable in this new context, which resulted in crises throughout all components of the production process. Considerable uncertainty arose about the new norms for programming and how power and control would be reallocated within the industry.

New technological capabilities and consumers' response to them forced the moguls of the network era to imagine their businesses anew and face fresh competitors who had the vision to foresee the new era. As suggested by the duration of the multi-channel transition, this industrial reconfiguration often produced unanticipated outcomes and developed haphazardly. Much of the sense of crisis within the industry resulted from the inability of powerful companies to anticipate the breadth of change and to develop new business models in response. Those who dominated the network era sensed their businesses to be simultaneously under attack on multiple fronts, which often led to efforts to stifle change or deny the substance of the threats to conventional ways of doing business.[33] Entrenched network-era business entities consequently did not lead the transition to the post-network era; rather, mavericks such as TiVo, Apple, and YouTube connected with viewers and forced industrial evolution.

Contrary to the contemporary headlines, television was not on the verge of death or even dying. Although indications of all kinds of change abounded, there was no suggestion that the central box through which we viewed would be called anything other than television. Adjustments throughout the television industry would not turn us into "screen potatoes" or lead us to engage in "monitor studies." We have, and will continue to process coming changes through our existing understandings of *television*. We will continue to call the increasingly large black boxes that serve as the focal point of our entertainment spaces *television*—regardless of how many boxes we need to connect to them in order to have the experience we desire or whether they are giant boxes or flat screens mounted on walls in the manner once reserved for art and decoration. The U.S. television industry may be being redefined, the experience of television viewing may be being redefined, but our intuitive sense of this thing we call television remains intact—at least for now.

The following pages update understandings about television's industrial practices from which others might build analyses of the substantial adjustments occurring within media systems and their societies of reception. The book also contributes to the necessary rethinking of "old" media in new contexts. The deterioration of the foundational business model upon which the commercial television industry long has operated suggests that a substantive change is occurring. Examining the industry at this time sheds light on how power is transferred during periods of institutional uncertainty and reveals the way that new possibilities can develop from emerging industrial norms. There is a similarity between the industrial moment considered here and that examined in Todd Gitlin's 1983 book, *Inside Prime Time*.[34] Both books chronicle the consequences of industrial practices of the television industry at the close of an era. Gitlin, however, captured this moment unintentionally. This work, in contrast, is reflexively aware of the transitory status of the practices it explores.

Examining the "television" that so confounded executives such as Moonves and Berman requires that I also consider many of the other boxes we connect to our televisions to expand our ability to use television, such as cable/satellite boxes and digital video recorders. At last count, a neat pile of no fewer than six rectangular black boxes was stacked below my television. Each serves a different function: some enhance my ability to access and control television programs, while others allow the set to function independently of the content made to stream through it. Here, I focus upon devices that deliver and enhance content produced and understood as "television"—so that the VCR derives its importance from its function of recording content transmitted as television programming. Likewise, I emphasize the DVD as a means to distribute television series, despite its other and equally important functions that connect it to the film industry.

As new distribution methods allowed viewers to share "television" content among their televisions, computers, and mobile phones, content boundaries among screen technologies disintegrated. I do not intend to denigrate, displace, or suggest a hierarchy of importance in the contemporary uses of television by focusing on the content and industrial practices culturally and historically defined as that of "television" rather than also including a detailed examination of applications previously perceived to be more particular to the computer.[35] At the same time that I circumscribe this understanding of television, I acknowledge there are complicated tensions and inconsistencies: Rich Frank's grandson may prefer to watch TiVo, but he probably considers himself to be watching "television" in a manner different from my colleague, who claims to watch videos, not "television."

Perhaps paradoxically I take a particular type of television—"prime-time programming"—and the national broadcast networks as the book's focus. Despite significant industry changes, as I completed the book, prime-time programming remained the most viewed and dominant form of "television." The post-network era threatens to eliminate time-based hierarchies, but the distinctive status of prime time is determined as much by its budgets and production practices as by the time of day in which it airs. Changing industrial norms bore consequences for all programming. Adjustments in production components also affected affiliate and independent stations in significant and particular ways, but the breadth of these matters prevents me from addressing them here. Although the affiliates represent a large part of the television industry, the consequences of post-network shifts affected these stations in substantially different ways depending, among other things, on whether the station was owned and operated by a network, located in a large or small market, and the network with which the station was affiliated.

The next chapter briefly steps away from the book's main focus on how shifts in industrial practices and business norms affect programming to meditate on some of the more abstract and bigger issues—some might say theories—called into question by these institutional adjustments. Concerns about how television operates as a cultural institution, the adaptation of tools used to understand it, and the development of new ones aid us in thinking about intersections of television and culture that may not be the primary concern of those who work in the industry. Such questions and concerns are nonetheless of crucial importance to the rest of us who live in this world of fragmented audiences and wonder about the effects of the erosion of the assumptions we have long shared about television.

Each aspect of production examined in Chapters 2 through 6 changed on a different timetable in the course of the multi-channel transition. By 2005, technological capabilities and distribution methods characteristic of post-network organization had emerged, while other production components were not as substantially developed. Thus, each of these chapters focuses on a particular production component—technology, creation, distribution, advertising, and audience measurement—and explores the process of transition, what practices have changed, and their consequences with regard to how television functions as a cultural institution.

With a focus on technology, Chapter 2 explores how new devices have made television more multifaceted and enabled more varied uses than were common during the network era. By 2005, new television technologies enabled three distinct capabilities—convenience, mobility, and theatricality—that led to different expectations and uses of television and created a diversified experience of the medium in contrast to the uniform one common in the network era. Technologies including DVRs, portable televisions, and high-definition television—among many others—produce complicated consequences for the societies that adopt them as viewers gain greater control over their entertainment experience, yet become tethered by an increasing range of devices that demand their attention and financial support.

Chapter 3 explores the practices involved in the making of television, particularly the institutional adjustments studios and networks made during and after the implementation of the financial interest and syndication rules, as well as the effects of these adjustments on the content the industry produces. Studios have responded to changing economic models by battling with creative guilds and unions to maintain new revenue streams, shifting production out of union-dominated Los Angeles, and creating vertically integrated production and distribution entities. Changing competitive practices among networks have borne significant adjustments in the types of shows the industry produces and expanded the range of profitable storytelling. The chapter thus examines how redefined production norms have created opportunities for different types of programming and required new promotion techniques.

Some of the most phenomenal adjustments in the television industry result from viewers' expanded ability to control the flow of television and to move it out of the home. Whereas a distribution "bottleneck" characterized the network era and much of the multi-channel transition, the bottleneck broke open in late 2005 with nearly limitless possibilities for viewers to access programming. Chapter 4 explores how viewers gained access to television in an increasing array of outlets that featured differentiated business models. New distribution methods made once unprofitable programming forms viable and decreased the risk of unconventional programming, opening creative opportunities in the industry and contributing to the fundamental changes in the production processes discussed throughout the book.

Chapter 5 examines how commercial television's financiers—the advertisers—also helped advance its redefinition by embracing both new and much older advertising strategies in the early 2000s. Various alternatives to the thirty-second advertisement emerged, such as product placement, integration, branded entertainment, and sponsorship, but these strategies did not threaten to supplant the thirty-second advertisement as a dominant form. Rather, the diversified strategies were symptomatic of the conditions of a multifaceted post-network era that relies upon multiple, co-existing advertising strategies. At the same time, though, these different advertising techniques have come to enable a new variety of programming and to yield significant implications for television as a cultural institution. The chapter closes with examinations of *The Shield, The Days,* and Super Bowl XXXVIII to illustrate the narrative differentiation made possible by advertiser support of a fragmented media environment and the breadth of content such an environment can sustain.

Following the examination of advertising, Chapter 6 explores the often-unconsidered role of audience measurement that proved particularly contentious in the late years of the multi-channel transition. Industry leader Nielsen Media Research endeavored to introduce technological upgrades that reallocated advertising dollars, while new distribution methods and advertising strategies required impartial measurement for validation. The existing paradigm of audience measurement proved increasingly insufficient for the variation characteristic of post-network television. This chapter considers the crucial role of audience measurement and developments during the tumultuous early 2000s, as well as the consequences adjustments in this sector might bring to the production of television in the future.

While Chapters 2 through 6 include many examples that apply somewhat abstract industrial practices to specific shows and circumstances, Chapter 7 takes a detailed look at how technology, creation, distribution, advertising, and audience measurement intersect in five very different programs. Each of the five cases explored here owe their existence or success to production practices uncharacteristic of the network era and tell a particular and distinctive story about production processes at the end of the multi-channel transition. These shows, *Sex and the City, Survivor, The Shield, Arrested Development,* and *Off to War,* illustrate how changes in multiple practices interconnected to expand the range of stories that could be profitably told on U.S. television, as well as pointing to some of the implications of this expanded storytelling field for the industry and culture.

The perspective here involves looking ahead, not to predict, but to prepare for a new era of television experience and criticism. The precise form that the technologies and uses of television will take are not definite, but substantial industrial ruptures are already apparent, and the need for practical information and conceptual models to rethink the medium are evident. The following pages may consequently serve as both a eulogy to the television we have experienced to this point and prepare our understanding of the medium yet to come.