CHAPTER 1

Television in Transition

Television in the new century looks and feels different. While it remains possible to simply "watch television" – it is still available as a continuous flow of aural and video "wallpaper" – there are increasingly more means and incentives to watch specific programs. Television has been asking for more and different kinds of attention. Television is more visually arresting, nearly always displaying what John Thornton Caldwell has described as a "stylistic exhibitionism," symptomatic of developing institutional practices of "televisuality" (1995). These practices now extend from news programming that employs holograms to sitcoms shot feature-film style with a single camera to the use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) on daytime serials. Narrative formal structures have changed emphasis as well, with episodic seriality[1] the new norm in prime-time narrative programming and plot temporality less likely to be exclusively linear, whether in dramas from *Lost* to *Life on Mars* or sitcoms from *Coupling* to *How I Met Your Mother*. New programming forms have become abundant, from "infotainment" and "reality" shows to original cable programming that ranges from subscription-only high-end "quality" narrative to entire channels focused on home renovation or food preparation or pet ownership. Individual television programs, meanwhile, are more likely to be available in more places, effectively expanding temporal access to a single episode (or entire season) of a favorite program that might now be broadcast one night, shown on cable later that week, available for "streaming" from the network website or Hulu.com or on-demand from a cable provider later that day, downloadable from iTunes the next week, available on DVD later that year, and in syndication soon thereafter. At the same time, the television program, as aired, is increasingly likely to be only part of a larger possible experience, which may also include extensive and multiple related websites, short, tangential episodes for internet or mobile phone viewing, associated periodicals, books, and documentaries (even if only available as a DVD ''extra''), and related merchandising from t-shirts to videogames[2] (see, for example, Booker 2001; Jenkins 2006). The temporal scarcity of television programs is being replaced with incentives for temporal investment.

This is because television is under threat. The transformation of television from public service or, in the US, three national commercial networks, to what has been variously described as a ''multichannel'' universe, ''post-network'' era, ''convergence culture,'' and /or potentially democratic Do It Yourself (DIY) period of television, has not gone undocumented.[3] Neo-liberal economic policies have led to market logics replacing regulatory controls even as the development and growth of cable, satellite, and digital delivery technologies have undermined the spectrum ''scarcity'' alibi for such controls in the first place. Where once public service broadcasters, endorsed, regulated, and perhaps funded by the state, had actual or near national monopolies on television broadcasting, now they are increasingly on the defensive amid a proliferation of commercial alternatives. Where not so long ago, in the US, competition for television audiences existed almost exclusively between ABC, CBS, and NBC, now more networks (Fox, CW, Univision, MyNetworkTV, etc.) have joined a competition that includes an array of several hundred (and still-counting) channels of television programming distributed to viewers by cable, telephone company (teleco), and/or direct broadcast satellite systems (DBS). Moreover, these distribution systems increasingly offer, in addition to programming channels, on-demand options, broadband internet service, voice over internet protocol (VoIP), and wireline telephony. These expanding options have been further joined by new consumer technologies from the remote control to the personal computer. Meanwhile, the expectation of costly ''production values'' has grown even as audiences have splintered – spatially and temporally – across the new multitude of channels and accompanying consumer electronics, which offer both time-shifting and simply alternative options to television viewers.

Considering these relatively recent and still proliferating transformations in television, Lynn Spigel has recently summarized their trajectory, arguing that ''if TV refers to the technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking that were associated with the medium in its classical public service and three-network age, it appears that we are now entering a new phase of television – the phase that comes after 'TV' " (2004: 2). This phase that comes after TV has been accompanied, indeed facilitated by an increasingly powerful multinational commercial media sector. Nonetheless, it has been largely experienced as a crisis within the existing television industry, regardless of who profits. The entire paradigm of broadcasting is being reconceived, which has proved threatening to those whose knowledge, practices, and livelihoods have been premised on that paradigm.

The programming produced for television during this period is therefore unavoidably a product of this crisis mentality. Individual television programs have taken on even greater significance and now face newly heightened pressure to aggregate audiences across media platforms and distribution outlets. For viewers and the industry alike, television programming must function as a familiar and reliable touchstone amid an increasingly uncertain infrastructure and set of practices. In all significant ways, therefore, television is in transition.

Television Industry

The growth of new corporate media conglomerates, global in their operations and outlook; new technologies of distribution and reception; new protocols of viewing; and even the changing regulatory environment and the economic, political, and ideological understandings that inform it, are not the primary focus of this book. Instead they are the ever-present context for the focus of this book. This book remains intently interested in these developments, but examines them not for their own sake but for the responses they have so far evoked, most significantly in the ways in which these developments have material effects and meaning at the site that matters most to people outside of the television industry: the programming. To understand these responses, their nature, intentions, and scope better, it is worth briefly rehearsing how the television industry, particularly its program producers and distributors, has understood and conducted its business.

Consider the influential example of US television. Throughout the so-called network era in the US, the three major commercial broadcast networks functioned essentially as programming distribution companies. Rather than produce their own programming, they each licensed programs produced by other companies to air. With few national broadcast networks licensing programming from many production companies, these producers were forced to ‘‘deficit finance’’ most of their shows, charging the networks less to air them than they cost to produce. The networks distributed this programming to contractually-affiliated, but independently-owned, stations[4] that were compensated by the networks to ‘‘clear’’ that programming to air, along with some national advertising. The programming, packaged into ‘‘dayparted’’ (e.g. ‘‘primetime’’ or ‘‘late night’’) schedules and heavily, nationally promoted by the networks, was mostly designed to be appealing to a mass audience, imagined as multiple instances of a middle-class nuclear family gathered around a home’s only television, without anyone registering objections strong enough to motivate the trip across the room to change the channel.[5] Programs that were successful enough would survive into syndication where they would be licensed to local stations directly, paying off the production deficit and generating profit for the producer while filling the air-time not supplied by the affiliated network.[6]

For commercial networks and broadcast stations alike, this was all done in order to provide programming that would aggregate an audience that could in turn be essentially sold to (actually, promised in advance to) advertisers who would pay (by the eyeball, as it were) to have their commercial spots aired on television. Thus, in order to aggregate as large an audience as possible at the times promised to advertisers, it was crucial to have the broadest geographic (spatial) reach while controlling (temporal) scarcity. For broadcast stations, geographic reach was a function of signal strength (and frequency spectrum placement), regulated by the Federal Communications Commission. For networks, geographic reach was a function of affiliation agreements with these stations in each of the nation’s markets.[7]

For both, programming scarcity was a function of temporal control. Any given episode of any given program would air in any given market once – usually at the time the network decreed, although ultimately decided on by the individual station owner. If the program was still in production, the episode would then likely be repeated once, possibly twice (often the following summer). Then, years later, it might return (somewhat edited to accommodate more commercials, charged a lesser rate) during the day or late at night in off-network syndication. The apparently essential ephemerality of the broadcast signal meant that these would remain the only opportunities to see this program, placing greater value on the temporal window in which they were made available for viewing. By combining this carefully controlled temporal program scarcity with the greatest possible spatial/geographic reach (most affiliates, most powerful signal, etc.), networks competed with each other for aggregate audience attention that would lead to high advertising dollars by bringing as many eyeballs as possible ‘‘together’’ at the same time. While the programming was important, the television industry, as a business, was primarily defined through access to spatial reach combined with temporal scarcity. The biggest networks gathered the most viewers.

While there was obviously more variation and transformation during this era than a mere summary could suggest, the basic premise, at least, remained apparently unchallenged until the 1980s. By the start of the 1980s a seemingly rapid series of changes in regulation over the television industry, combined with new technological developments, began to transform these basic premises of television broadcasting, destabilizing received practices and introducing new means of access and new competition for the broadcast audience. The audience, meanwhile, became imagined less and less as a national mass and more and more as a fragmented collection of niche identities and interests.

Corporate and Regulatory Transition

In the United States the confluence of regulatory and technological changes became particularly relevant where television signals were delivered by coaxial cable. In the culmination of a trend toward greater deregulation and the facilitation of private industry growth that had been occurring over the course of the 1970s, the FCC (usually at the behest of successive court decisions) had opened the way to the rapid growth of new cable channels and their distribution through corporate system operators[8] (Mullen 2008). Cable-delivered programming became an increasingly available, rapidly growing alternative to broadcast reception. Moreover, these cable channels – which were not networks with affiliated broadcast stations, but rather essentially satellite channels given carriage agreement contracts with various cable system operators – were not subject to the same FCC regulations as national broadcast networks, including the so-called financial interest and syndication regulations (Fin-Syn), imposed during the 1970s to open up access to the television industry by greatly restricting a national broadcast network’s ownership of and syndication rights to the programming it distributed.

Community Antenna Television (CATV) companies were at first operators of large antennas coupled to signal boosters that would redistribute distant television signals to local, usually small town, homes through terrestrial, coaxial cable, for an operating fee. Originally introduced to overcome the geographic impediments to broadcast signals in the US, particularly as they were felt in rural areas beyond the normal range of the closest television stations, they served the function of further expanding the spatial reach of broadcast organizations. The deregulation of a number of restrictions governing this cable industry, culminating by the end of the 1970s, meant that cable system operators could now expand their business model to include more channels and offer services in municipalities where broadcast signals could already be received. Within a very few years companies operating cable systems simultaneously in multiple municipalities, known as multi-system operators (MSOs), were providing dozens of additional channels to subscribers around the country previously used to only three networks. Between 1975 and 1980, as cable systems were introduced into more populated areas, basic cable subscribership grew from 9.2 million to 17.7 million households. Between only 1980 and 1981 more than a dozen new cable channels were launched, including CNN, MTV, USA, Cinemax, Bravo, TLC and BET. These joined already nationally available channels such as Pat Robertson's CBN, C-SPAN, ESPN, Nickelodeon, HBO, Showtime, and various "superstations" like WTBS, WGN and WOR (who benefited in particular from the elimination of "anti-leapfrogging" regulations) (Mullen 2003).

From this point cable television became a significant component of the television landscape, offering an ever-growing array of viewing options (see Figure 1.1) that in turn necessitated a mushrooming supply of programming. The number of households subscribing to cable continued its precipitous growth, reaching the remarkable milestone of 50 percent of US homes as early as 1988. This number only increased through the 1990s, reaching 68 percent by 2000 (Lotz 2006). By 2007 86 percent of US television households subscribed to some kind of multi-channel system[9] (National Cable & Telecommunications Association).

For the broadcast networks, the rapid growth of cable meant a new form of national competition for the first time in years. Ultimately it portended the inevitable dispersion of the television audience across the multitude of new channels. While audience ratings numbers for any given program on cable were rarely even comparable to those of the worst-rated networks, it was clear that the terrain of television was changing. At the start of the

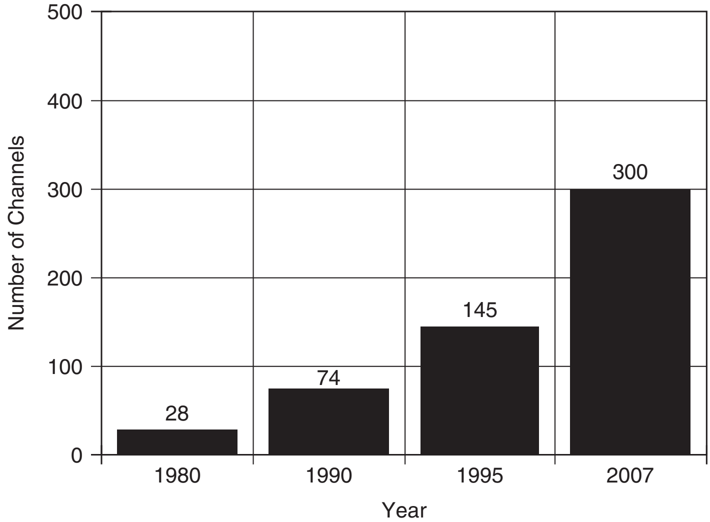

Figure 1.1 The number of cable channels available nationally (in US) *Source:* Allen (2004), Eastman and Ferguson (2009)

1980s, the three broadcast networks combined could claim 90 percent of viewers watching television during primetime. By the end of that decade the combined network share had diminished to 64 percent (Caldwell 1995). In June 1998, *Daily Variety* reported that "for the first week ever, more households tuned to basic cable during primetime than the four [ABC, CBS, NBC, plus Fox] major broadcast networks combined" (Katz 1998). By 2003 *Variety* could report that "basic cable as a category beat the seven broadcast networks [at this point including the prior four plus WB, UPN, and Pax] in household ratings for the first time ever in the November primetime sweeps" (Dempsey 2003: 1). For the broadcast networks, spatial reach was largely saturated (in the US, at any rate) and temporal containment was losing its promise to gather an audience around limited access to a program amid so many other options and distractions, themselves increasingly readily accessed.

Even as their aggregate hold on the television-viewing audience was slipping, however, the number of broadcast networks grew. The Fox Network, launched in 1986 to become the first successful new national broadcast network in the US in more than 30 years, for example, benefited immensely from an increasingly market-oriented Federal Communication Commission. A 1982 FCC regulatory revision had paved the way by encouraging the growth of new independent television stations (tripling in number by the time Fox went shopping for its own affiliates). The FCC also helped Fox (and thus, the FCC felt, encouraged network competition) by declaring it less than a full network, thereby allowing exceptions to media ownership and Fin-Syn regulations then still restricting the other networks.[10]

Further deregulation followed, changing the structures of the industry. Rules regarding media cross-ownership limits were relaxed,[11] fostering the growth of horizontal integration. Television stations became commodities, bought, sold and traded, while well-financed companies grew and combined as they attempted to capitalize on the growing dearth of restrictions.

At the same time financial interest and syndication regulation was slackened, encouraging the vertical integration of media corporations. With the transitions in television already evident by the early 1990s, Fin-Syn was soon perceived by regulators to have outlived its usefulness, to be unfairly restricting the networks, and to be impeding the all-important market. After several years of increasingly relaxed enforcement, Fin-Syn existed in name only beginning in September 1995. The 1996 Telecommunications Reform Act made the repeal of Fin-Syn official. This opened the floodgates for a series of corporate mergers combining once separate production and distribution companies (studios and networks) under the same parent conglomerate, now legally able to own the programming it also broadcast, so that today ABC and Disney Studios are part of the same company; NBC, Telemundo, and Universal are all part of General Electric;[12] the Fox Network and 20th Century Fox are both part of News Corp; and CBS, as well as Paramount Studios, were for some time both part of Viacom.[13] Single corporate entities were now broadcasting programs they produced, owned, and syndicated. This changed the calculus in decisions regarding which programs got to air, how they were scheduled, and when (or if) they would be cancelled. A new value was placed on individual programs, making their ownership a significant factor in broadcasting and distribution decisions.

Companies that produced television programming but did not control their own means of broadcasting it, meanwhile, became increasingly wary. Thus the 1990s saw efforts to create even more national broadcast networks. Paramount Television Group's (at the time) chief, Kerry McCluggage, explaining his company's formation of UPN, recalled that with the demise of Fin-Syn:

> We really felt that the studios that did not have their own distribution outlet would get leveraged in the marketplace by networks demanding ownership in the programming as kind of the price of admission for access to their schedule. And that pretty much played out (quoted in Daniels & Littleton 2007: 23).

Similarly, Time Warner, with no existing broadcast network remaining to simply acquire, felt that starting its own was "a strategic imperative" (quoted in Daniels & Littleton 2007: 18) considering its television production division, Warner Bros. Television, was one of the leading producers of successful and profitable network television programming (with shows like *ER* and *Friends*). In order to guarantee a national broadcast outlet for the programming it produced while continuing to maintain full ownership rights to that programming, Time Warner launched the WB network in January 1995. Time Warner conceived the new network as a strategic asset that would add (or at least maintain) value to its television production division given an uncertain, deregulated future. It was a decision based on maintaining the value of intellectual property. Responding to the changing dynamics of the television industry's infrastructure, a new broadcast network was created in order to maintain the value of a company's television *programs*. Media conglomerate Viacom, with a very similar strategy in mind, launched the United Paramount Network (UPN) five days later.[14] The maintenance of intellectual property and its leveraging across space, time, and different media signaled the nature of television's transition.

Technological Transition

The proliferation of alternative channels transforming the space and time of television, meanwhile, was abetted by the growth of new consumer electronics developed and marketed throughout this era. The navigation of the growing range of new independent channels, networks, and cable offerings was facilitated, for example, by the growing ubiquity of remote control devices (RCD), now standard with the purchase of a television or related consumer electronics. Where once television presumably had to be sufficiently objectionable to motivate a trip across the room to change channels (or turn off the television or even merely lower the volume), now, with so many more channels available to view, controlling the television and switching channels was possible with only the small movement of a finger. The remote control, of course, facilitated "zapping" to another channel to avoid commercial breaks (or boring bits) and "grazing" to see what else was on. While this is now simply taken for granted as an absolute minimal level of interaction, it registered at the time as a new and transformative behavior, altering established programming strategies and placing even more pressure (and potentially value) on television programming.

The next level of home-based "control" accompanied the domestic commercial introduction of the video cassette recorder (VCR), available to consumers in the second half of the 1970s. The VCR enabled viewers to "time shift" programming by recording it onto magnetic tape for later viewing, practice "zipping" past recorded commercials (or boring parts, for that matter) with the (included) RCD's fast-forward button or, alternatively, to watch pre-recorded (uncensored, uninterrupted) content in lieu of television programming all together.[15] Home ownership and use of the VCR steadily rose over the course of the 1980s from less than 20 percent to nearly 70 percent of US homes by the end of the decade (Küng-Shankleman 2000). The artificially imposed temporal scarcity and supposedly essential ephemerality of television programming began to be circumvented.

Subsequent technological developments have accelerated the transformations in the space and time of television. Home satellite, direct broadcast satellite, and fiber optics have supplemented coaxial cable as technologies of home television delivery supporting hundreds of channels of programming as well as video on demand (VOD) and pay-per-view options. Consumer electronic devices ranging from the digital video disc (DVD) and digital video recorder (DVR) to the personal computer (PC) and video game console variously offer television viewers control, distraction, and/or direct interaction in relation to television programming. Outside the home various mobile television platforms have become available, from portable DVD players and portable video games that double as viewing screens to mobile phones and iPods, to further complicate the transforming space and time of television.

Television *programs* therefore have become the center of a business strategy unsure of the future of distribution and reception; indeed of how, how often, when, or where viewers will watch. With so many, varied means of distribution and reception, television has come increasingly to rely upon the ownership of intellectual property to overcome uncertainty. It is now individual programs that are meant to entice consumer spending over space and through time, across all manner of distribution. Such programming is increasingly designed to be promiscuous, ubiquitous, and to transcend specific times, screens, devices and borders.

Global Transition

Facing the saturation of domestic markets, the television industry has sought to continue growing the geographic space of television through international expansion. As audiences have been perceived to fragment, US television has become increasingly aggressive in pursuing the international expansion of its viewership. Where once it was possible to consistently profit from the domestic market and simply undersell international competition for additional revenue, the global audience is now an increasingly integral part of programming and fiscal strategy for the US television industry. International distribution deals have become a necessity for deficit-financed television productions, particularly expensive hour drama series. It is unusual now for a successful US network program to be unavailable around most of the planet, whether it is *24* in Great Britain or *Grey's Anatomy* in Turkey or *Heroes* in Thailand.

Technological, industrial, and regulatory changes have been endemic not only to the US, however. The often globally popular programming and rather uniquely commercial history of US television have served as influential models for broadcasters and television industries around the world. The US model – with its particular history as a commercial, market-driven, competitive industry rather than a public service – has served as harbinger of practices increasingly being adopted and encouraged around the world. The US industry thus serves as a reference for state and public service broadcast systems faced with increasingly liberalized oversight, regulation, and competitive fiscal regimes amid global economic trends endorsing privatization and market-orientation. Faced with new forms of competition (for the first time for some systems), institutional responses have varied. In many cases, however, the liberalization of television markets has occasioned a shift in institutional practices toward the emulation of commercial systems (with whom they are increasingly asked to compete). Programming in many systems around the world is now expected to be competitive, readily exportable to a variety of markets, and yet to continue to fulfill public service and local state mandates.

At the same time, it is not always readily apparent how to delimit television production or signification by national border. Amid the changing regulatory environments and new technologies of television, the 1990s saw rapid global growth in international joint ventures, such as treaty-based co-productions, co-ventures, and twinning packages. Such arrangements offered numerous incentives. International co-productions, for example, are designed to combine tax incentives with quota exceptions in order to facilitate the pooling of resources and access to markets, allowing smaller, less well-financed television industries to compete better with expensive commercial productions (particularly US productions).[16] Other strategies have included simply producing television in alternative national locations considered more advantageous. So-called runaway productions, for example, might be produced by a US company, but outside the Los Angeles area. Relocating physical production facilities to the "Cheap White North" of Canada,[17] or to Mexico, or New Zealand, as three common examples, offers such incentives as cheaper production facilities, non-union labor, tax abatements, and even occasionally less restrictive safety and labor constraints. This is not to mention new and visually interesting exterior locations.

Benefiting from what Miller et al. (2005) have described as the new international division in cultural labor (NICL), many of these productions utilize new media and digitalization technologies to produce programming not essentially located in any one place (but presumed to appeal to many). A program, like *Smallville* (see Chapter 5), produced by Warner Bros. Television, for example, might have a cast and crew combining US, Canadian, and British citizens and run physical production facilities in Vancouver, while maintaining writing staff, special-effects facilities, and various post-production crews at multiple locations in and around Los Angeles, all connected through specialized high-speed networks (Graser 2001).

Efforts to reduce above-the-line production costs (particularly writing and star salaries and residuals), while featuring casts meant to be drawn from the television audience itself, emerged in the flowering of unscripted reality television programming during this period. This genre proved exceptionally amenable to global circulation and local accommodation, although largely through the licensing of format concepts rather than actual filmed episodes. Such an example further demonstrates the alternative means developed for the continued expansion of the space of television. Increasingly such expansion has relied on the carefully policed ownership of intellectual property rather than any specific means of delivery. By licensing the format of a program such as *Big Brother* or *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, intellectual property rights holders could market a concept globally, while local broadcasters could tailor details of a program to local practices and tastes (McMillin 2007; Moran & Malbon 2006; Straubhaar 2007). Thus the British program *Weakest Link* could air in more than 40 countries, but feature local references and be hosted by local or regional celebrities. Even program formats that failed in one national market (e.g. *Power of 10* hosted by Drew Carey on CBS in the US 2007–8) could prove popular and successful in another (e.g. *Dus Ka Dum* hosted by Salman Khan on Sony TV in India) (Hasan 2008).

Whether it was the format or the program that was distributed globally, whether it was produced within a single national context or across multiple national borders, the television industry inevitably began to make accommodations for the increasingly necessary transnational travel of its programming during this period of television in transition. Programming, with traits that made format and/or narrative supposedly more transparent, lead the way. Thus reality programming proved cheap to produce and readily transportable as a format. Narrative programming, whose value is derived from specific stories and characters, meanwhile, has tended to rely upon spectacular special effects, visceral action, and fascinating visuals to assure interest across national, cultural and linguistic barriers. Requiring such considerable production investment has meant that this narrative programming is asked to travel as produced, rather than as a (prohibitively costly) locally customizable format. The burden of appealing to multiple local sites of viewing is therefore placed on the narrative and the look of the program.

Programming Transition

Indeed the look of programming everywhere took on new significance. Amid literally hundreds of new viewing options, increasingly in multiple global locations, at any given time, television programming was an increasingly cluttered terrain, making it difficult for individual programs (even channels) to get noticed, attract viewers, or crucially, to justify their advertising rates. As John Thornton Caldwell (1995) has compellingly argued, the dramatically new variations in the look of television programming that accompanied this rapidly growing array of alternatives developed precisely to attract attention from amid this clutter. In the process, it has inspired further reconsiderations of the specific role of programming in engaging audiences.

For decades, television's iconic style had been what Caldwell calls zero-degree television production, in which the production style consisted of "uniform settings, lighting, looks, and cutting" regardless of network and throughout program after program, most of which looked as if they always took "place between the flat and oppressive hours of ten a.m. and two p.m. – not exactly the cinematographer's magic hour" (1995: 58). With the emergence of cable and VCRs in particular, viewers were suddenly exposed to a variety of aesthetic practices, visual styles, and narrative variations they had rarely encountered on their television. This included the lavish "production values" of recent feature films on premium movie channels like HBO (or the VCR) as well as the multi-screen display, videographic-title-heavy look of early CNN and the visually obtuse, narratively garbled, rapidly edited, and thus aesthetically exciting music videos of MTV (played one after another, with no apparent narrative or even logical connection).

It was clear that through some combination of design (getting attention as a brand new alternative to network television) and necessity (limited budgets and options in terms of producing content), cable channels were not providing programming that was simply the least objectionable. All this rapidly growing competition combined with radical changes in the way television could look, encouraged networks to begin emphasizing, exhibiting, and experimenting with the iconicity, the aesthetic look, and the style of their programming. The established broadcast networks responded initially by demonstrating their significant fiscal advantage over all new comers, licensing programming with rich, lavish, feature-film-style "production values" demonstrating a new sense of aesthetics. Content also became potentially more controversial, with sex, violence, complex situations, and language not always in deference to the presumed nuclear family viewing together. Least objectionable programming became only one network option for certain periods of programming. Other options meant that the flat, even lighting, non-descript locations, and blandly straightforward visual style gave way to the spectacularization of color, lighting, music, cinematography, and editing as well as to stylized dialogue, elaborate production numbers, self-conscious performances, and self-referentiality. Programming was distinguished through a self-conscious "stylistic exhibitionism" offering visual and aural interest ranging from "liveness" and videographic effects to the aping of cinematic lushness and production values (Caldwell 1995).

Such attention to what Caldwell has termed ''televisuality'' as part of the production and programming practices of television could not avert the decline of network dominance. The array of shows eagerly exhibiting a range of styles from the cinematic to the videographic, however, did draw further attention to the growing significance of individual programming decisions. This renewed attention to the production styles of individual programs corresponded to institutional transformations relying on the copyright and trademark value of individual programs as the new center of the television industry. Programs had to look good in order to attract attention amid so many alternatives, but increasingly they also needed to intrigue and sustain interest. This interest had to be sustained, moreover, not simply long enough to compel a viewer to set her/his remote down, but over an entire afterlife in which the program could be viewed multiple times in multiple contexts for years to come.

Television Property and Narrative

While the formerly big three networks continued – perhaps eventually beyond the point of credibility – to assert their superior ratings numbers, arguing that they remained the only true place to reach a mass, national audience, they nevertheless scrambled to compensate for what they perceived to be the rapid fragmentation of that audience. Amid such easy access to so many different channels and new media, individual programs were increasingly seized upon as the crucial element that would (or would not) attract an audience. As Michael Curtin observed:

> In this environment, media producers find that the branding of products is often more important than futile attempts to control the mode of distribution. Unlike the network era when the control of a few national channels was the key to profitability, neo-network television firms focus on marketing, promotion, and the control of intellectual property (Curtin 2004: 281).

With the growth of new television channels and the ability to quickly navigate among them, programs have become, first of all, an increasingly important means of drawing attention amid the clutter. Moreover, it has become increasingly clear, as Curtin argued, that ''given a greater range of choices, audiences are drawn to the products by textual elements – characters, story lines, special effects – rather than by the technological and regulatory constraints formerly imposed on the delivery system'' (Curtin 2004: 281). Stylistically exhibitionist, character-driven narrative television programs have taken on a new sort of value during these transitions.

Mitigating against the increasing uncertainty of a fragmenting audience is only one component in this new attention to television programs. As individual companies have been increasingly encouraged to produce, broadcast, distribute, and own their programs, they have come to understand them as (intellectual) property in which they have invested time and capital. From such a perspective, strategies of artificial scarcity have become less desirable as a means of producing value from such property, even as these strategies have become increasingly readily circumvented. Servicing a television network's broadcast schedule and ad sales is now imagined as only the first step in a program's sustained and expanding life as a valuable property. Ultimately, the expanding spatial reach of a temporally limited program is being replaced as an institutional strategy by another that emphasizes the spatial and temporal ubiquity of access to that program. Rather than artificially imposed temporal limits, from a property owner's point of view, television programs are now understood to benefit from extending and sustaining temporal interest. Even as intellectual property travels spatially and geographically, its greatest value accrues by virtue of its temporal travel as it becomes associated with durable branding strategies that can be attached across media and through time.

This reordering of the space and time of television has become the new strategy for seeking out and aggregating increasingly dispersed audiences. As a result, programming itself has been asked to change, drawing attention to itself from within a crowded programming environment, sustaining attention over time and across media, and traveling across temporal, technological, and national borders. Such changes have altered not only the look of television programming, but also the stories it narrates and the forms of that narrative. These changes to television narrative, their relationship to both an industry in transition and a splintering audience, and the kinds of meanings that emerge all inform the chapters that follow.