AMC : Stumbling toward a New Television Canon
Deborah L. Jaramillo
Television New Media 2013 14: 167 originally published online 20 April 2012
DOI: 10.1177/1527476412442105

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://tvn.sagepub.com/content/14/2/167

Published by:
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Television & New Media can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://tvn.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://tvn.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://tvn.sagepub.com/content/14/2/167.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Feb 5, 2013
OnlineFirst Version of Record - Apr 20, 2012
What is This?
AMC: Stumbling toward a New Television Canon

Deborah L. Jaramillo

Abstract

AMC offers an intriguing case study in the evolution of scripted series on cable television. At its inception, the network boasted one of the most stable and coherent brands on cable, and it now harbors one of the least. In spite of this shift, it has cultivated successful and noteworthy dramatic series. This article explores AMC’s contribution to the twenty-first-century television canon by examining its financial constraints, industrial misfortunes, and leadership changes. This article will construct a history of AMC by drawing from an interview with Vlad Wolynetz, former VP of production, series, and movies at AMC, and from two decades of trade and journalistic articles. AMC has adjusted its programming over time to accommodate the challenges that its minimal resources could not surmount, and its history calls into question the power of the brand and its connection to quality television.

Keywords

branding, cable television, AMC, HBO, Turner Classic Movies

Like many networks on the U.S. basic cable tier, AMC has lived through a succession of format changes that reveal a mercurial cable landscape. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, AMC boasted one of the most stable and coherent brands on cable, and it now harbors one of the least. In spite of this drastic shift, it has cultivated successful and important dramatic series. This basic cable network, with its storied past and tumultuous development, offers an intriguing case study in the evolution of scripted series on cable television and the relevance of the brand name.

This article explores AMC’s contribution to a twenty-first-century television canon by examining its financial constraints, industrial misfortunes, and leadership changes. The aim of the article is to integrate the network’s industrial history and branding

1Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Deborah L. Jaramillo, Boston University, 640 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215
Email: DLJ@BU.EDU
history in order to assess its ascendance as a rival to the quality dramas associated with HBO. Along with more than two decades of trade and journalistic articles, my interview with Vlad Wolynetz, former vice president of production, series, and movies at AMC, helps to shape the narrative of a network stumbling from one phase of its development to the next. AMC has adjusted its programming over time to accommodate the challenges that its minimal resources could not surmount. Programming adjustments have resulted in the decline of AMC’s brand identity, but its descent into a muddled brand name has, in the twenty-first century, paralleled its most creative moment. The history of AMC thus calls into question the power of the brand and its connection to quality TV.

**Distinction and Cable Television**

When HBO broke ground with *Oz*, *Sex and the City* and *The Sopranos* in immediate succession, media scholars pounced on the implications. Had HBO exploded rigid boundaries of decency and quality? What did the HBO brand really mean? How had HBO cordoned itself off from the rest of broadcast and cable, and why did its series look so “cinematic”? HBO came to symbolize the pinnacle of success in the post-network era. The broadcast networks were terrified of digital video recorders and the internet, but it turns out that they had much to fear from HBO. Premium cable was using traditional broadcast genres to garner acclaim. In addition, the lack of regulation and advertising on HBO engendered a premium cable sensibility that allowed for a greater degree of creative freedom.

The simplicity yet singularity of HBO’s new programming strategy invited a slew of inquiry. Scholars theorized about taste cultures, quality, and art, arguing that HBO distinguished itself (with varying degrees of success) as a safe space for boundless creativity free from sanitized or lowest common denominator pop culture (Anderson 2008; Feuer 2007; Jaramillo 2002; Kelso 2008; Lotz 2007a; McCabe and Akass 2007; McMurria 2007). These works deconstructed HBO’s self-identification by examining the premium cable network’s prime demographics, special industrial circumstances, and relationships with producer-auteurs. They also helped to define a shift in how television was understood and positioned, particularly because HBO’s tagline—“It’s Not TV. It’s HBO.”—and overall brand attempted to distance itself from the rest of its television kin. One major background theme in this literature is cable’s quest for stability in the midst of the medium’s turmoil. As emerging media offered alternatives to television proper, this scholarship focused on the survival instincts of the industry and the evolving tactics of cable television—already a member of “old” media.

Kelso argues that HBO’s space above the rest of television depends less on its “freedom” from the standard pressures and more on the way it makes money (2008, 49). Like the publishing and motion picture industries, HBO subsists on “first-order commodity relations” that tie the supply of the product to actual consumer demand rather than advertiser demand (Rogers et al. 2002, 46). As Kelso astutely notes, this economic foundation fostered a strategy of constant one-upmanship. He writes, “HBO
simply must continuously distinguish itself from broadcast and basic cable . . . if it hopes to remain viable,” but the crux of the branded complication is best expressed in his assertion that HBO “is forced [Kelso’s italics] to take risks” (2008, 49). The risks on HBO have not always translated to hits and have actually compromised HBO’s popularity, if not its brand. The brief runs of Rome, John from Cincinnati, Carnivàle, and Tell Me You Love Me proved that HBO did not embrace risk without financial reward. Indeed, finances played a key role in the instant renewals of Boardwalk Empire in 2010 and Game of Thrones in 2011. HBO renewed both series the day after their premieres because of the need to amortize the high production costs.1 While these big-budget series reflect one strategy in the second decade of the twenty-first century, HBO’s renewal of the half-hour series Enlightened in late 2011 amid the cancellations of Hung, Bored to Death, and How to Make It in America reveal its willingness to embrace a small program that attracts minimal viewers if award shows and critical acclaim are involved. As HBO has matured into an original programming powerhouse, it has created a track record that negotiates artistry, audience, and the health of the company. For Edgerton and Jones, one of the legacies of HBO is that its cutting-edge content has trickled down to basic cable in the form of an “‘aftereffect’ . . . [that] raises the bar and influences the kind of original programming that all of its various competitors . . . produce” (2008, 319).

Despite having different target audiences and programming, many basic cable networks have sought to attach intangible qualities to their names in order to cultivate loyal audiences. The literature on TV networks and brands conceptualizes branding as a top–down system in which the network attempts to guide viewers’ perceptions of signature programming and the entire programming slate. The network’s brand relies on a set of abstract traits, communicated in part by the network’s tagline and logo, which manifest in individual programs and link the programs to one another and back to the network. Scholars have argued the brand is the lifeblood of cable channels that must differentiate their products from each other and from the broadcast networks (Rogers et al. 2002; Sandler 2003). Caldwell equates the rise of branding with a “survival tactic” that is perpetuated by the fear of a hopelessly fragmented and shrinking audience (2006, 114-115). Similarly, Selznick writes that branding “became necessary in order to deal with the increased number of options offered to viewers” (2009, 181). All of the techniques that breakfast cereals, running shoes, and home appliance companies have employed over the years migrated to the television marketplace when it became much too crowded for cable networks to glide by on off-network reruns alone.

One benefit of branding success is the establishment of what Lotz calls “substantial cultural awareness”—a milestone that indicates something more than simply a loyal audience or a hit program (2007b, 183). The idea of cultural awareness is apt, considering that the brand’s “essence” is not something concrete but rather “the values and associations that are wrapped around the basic product or service” (Temporal 2008, 43). Selznick emphasizes the “emotional connection” that networks forge between their brands and their viewers, and she argues further that the brand is just as important to advertisers and cable multiple system operators (MSOs), if not more so (2009, 182).
The corporations that do the business of television and do business on television need assurances that networks attract loyal audiences. The strong brand is one such assurance, and that brand acts as a “filter” through which all decisions related to the network—from programming to promotion—must be directed (Selznick 2009, 183). Another long-term, large-scale benefit of strong branding includes the extension of the brand across different formats “to create a raft of interrelated products, which then work in aggregate to drive further consumer awareness of the media brand” (Murray 2005, 417). While the above work has illuminated the innovations of contemporary cable television, much of it fails to consider the massive amount of change a brand might have to undergo over the course of a network’s run.

In a 1955 article in *Harvard Business Review*, Gardner and Levy advanced a definition of branding that embraced both its relationship to consumers and its historical development. Gardner and Levy first asserted that the brand is a “public object”—a “complex symbol” that is in constant communication with consumers (1955, 35). The traits associated with the brand must circulate and attach themselves to the people who are wading through a sea of competitors. The authors then posited that the brand communicates “via the body of associations it has built up and acquired . . . over a period of time” (emphasis mine) (Gardner and Levy 1955, 35). Only the truly “reputable” brand succeeds in maintaining a “stable image through time,” a feat dependent on the public’s firm grip on the ideas associated with the brand (Gardner and Levy 1955, 36). The brand, tied as strongly as it is to the public (or the audience), demands calculated foresight on the part of the company (Gardner and Levy 1955, 1937). Different basic cable networks face the challenge of attracting loyal audiences and cultivating unique brands despite some shared programming choices—off-network syndicated programs and Hollywood films. If we believe that some basic cable networks aspire to air quality signature programming, then the onus of sustaining a quality brand rests with the network’s behavior. Applying Gardner and Levy’s argument to TV, if viewers are going to believe it, then the network must prove it to the audience consistently over time. Rogers et al. argue that “the ‘exclusivity’ of its original programming . . . shapes HBO’s identity,” but HBO managed to falter after *The Sopranos* even though its programming remained “exclusive” (2002, 51). HBO seemed to have more faith in its brand than in its content. Still, HBO’s built-in privilege propped up its image.

Assembled together in a different tier, basic cable networks are saddled with complications foreign to HBO. In her work on the industrial and programming strategies of the basic cable network Syfy, Selznick writes that the network faced a major branding challenge connected to its name. In its previous incarnation, The Sci Fi Channel had a “branded genre built right into the name,” but this proved to be far too niche to satisfy its corporate owners (2009, 186). In Sci Fi’s transition to Syfy—a move that Selznick notes was beneficial in terms of copyright—we see a set of circumstances wholly different from AMC’s. Selznick writes that because of the intricacies of the science fiction genre and the factionalization of sci fi fans, The Sci Fi Channel faced intense pressure to broaden the scope of its brand and reach new viewers who were not as dogmatic about the genre. As I will show, AMC faced intense pressure to remain true
to the branded genre built into its name—classic movies—but the intertwined problems of content ownership, licensing, and MSO negotiations forced it to abandon one of the strongest brands on cable.

**AMC: Not Another Movie Channel**

The industrial and programming history of AMC can be broken up into four distinct phases: the network’s initial branding, the rivalry with Turner Classic Movies, the shift to advertiser-supported programming, and the return to original scripted series. Each phase represents a strategy shift and not a natural progression. The historical development of AMC’s brand, which Gardner and Levy argue must be consistent in order to be credible, is littered with inconsistency and outright stumbling. AMC has encountered difficulties over time in part because it has not controlled most of its content, a key preoccupation and “commercial priority” of the larger media companies, according to Murray (2005, 418). The following account indicates that AMC, though pushed around throughout its first twenty years, may ultimately have benefited from the damage those difficulties inflicted on its brand. Without a coherent brand to limit the network, it has no clear dramatic sensibility to maintain and no particular niche audience to alienate.

**Phase I: AMC Establishes a Brand, 1984-1994**

In 1984, AMC debuted as a premium cable channel in 300,000 homes but in 1987 moved into the basic cable tier (Adalian 1999; Alexander 1991). Although AMC has had an assortment of owners over the years, the one constant until 2011 was Rainbow Media, which was a subsidiary of Cablevision—the ninth largest multichannel video programming distributor (MVPD) as of September 2011 (National Cable & Telecommunications Association 2012). In 1993, Rainbow announced a buyout of Liberty Media’s share of AMC to become the channel’s majority owner with a 75 percent stake; the purchase was complete in 1994 (Cable TV Purchase 1993; Dempsey 1994). On the completion of that deal, NBC became the minority owner with a 25 percent stake in AMC. And in 2011, Cablevision spun off Rainbow Media into a new company called AMC Networks, whose holdings include AMC, IFC, Sundance Channel, WeTV, and IFC Films (Szalai 2011).

While the ownership of AMC has been relatively uncomplicated, the business behind its programming format has proven to be convoluted. AMC debuted with a clearly defined identity; it was thoroughly branded by its own name—American Movie Classics. While premium cable channels pinned their success on new films, and basic cable channels showed older, cheap films, AMC created a space on television for an entirely new designation of cinema: the classic film. In a telephone conversation with the author on November 5, 2009, AMC's former vice president of production, series, and movies Vlad Wolynetz characterized the young network as “mostly an affiliate-sales and market-driven company” that “piggyback[ed] on the reputations
and affection of [classic films]” to boost sales (Vlad Wolynetz, personal communication). The result transcended affiliate sales and contributed to a solid brand. Explaining AMC’s successful brand in 1999, former CEO of Rainbow Media Josh Sapan remarked that the channel essentially recontextualized the type of old, inexpensive movie that appeared on TV late at night (Adalian 1999). In other words, AMC treated films from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s with respect, cultivating an atmosphere of reverence that was reinforced by theme nights, original documentaries, and hosts who would introduce the films by providing background information and engaging trivia. AMC cared about the integrity and artistry of films, the brand declared, to the extent that in 1993 the channel held its First Annual AMC Film Preservation Festival (Gable 1993). The economics of AMC supported the cinephile atmosphere, as well; the channel was supported initially by direct subscription and subsequently by cable subscriber fees. Advertisements did not tread on the hallowed ground of Old Hollywood. That decision was paramount. AMC’s format was entirely new on television, and it caught on quickly. Ten years after its debut in 300,000 homes, AMC boasted a subscriber base of fifty-one million (Dempsey 1995).

Capturing that base required a supply of quality product. Neither Cablevision nor Rainbow Media owned a film library, so AMC was forced to pay for the films it programmed. Over time, Murray argues, media companies have come to prioritize content ownership over content distribution, and the rationale behind the shift is apparent in AMC’s story (418). Without content of its own, AMC had to reach licensing agreements with various library owners like Universal Pay Television, which in 1991 sold AMC the rights to 400 pre-1948 Universal and Paramount films (Arnold 1991). Each agreement came with limited exclusivity and an expiration date, so licensing films was a recurring expense. Although AMC thrived, the size of its expenditures was made more apparent by the fact that WTBS and TNT—both owned by Turner Broadcasting, which purchased the MGM library in 1986 for $1.2 billion—had access to more than 3,000 films (Mifflin 1995). Although Turner’s channels also had licensing agreements with studios, they were not entirely dependent on someone else’s property. AMC’s only property was a brand that boasted classic films without interruptions. That singular identity would soon be challenged by yet another Turner network.

Phase II: Turner Classic Movies Encroaches on AMC’s Brand, 1994-1998

In 1994 Turner launched Turner Classic Movies (TCM), a twenty-four-hour, commercial-free network in the vein of AMC. As Wolynetz notes, “That’s when the competition sort of started. All the subsequent changes . . . began to take root” (Vlad Wolynetz, personal communication). TCM’s entrance threatened AMC’s monopoly on uninterrupted classic movies, and it therefore threatened its brand. Unable to compete with TCM’s library and financial heft, AMC was forced to experiment with the flexibility of its brand on two fronts: movies and original series.
Helping to mold TCM was AMC’s former head programmer, Brad Siegel. Siegel’s plan was to emulate the more successful programming strategies of AMC (the hosted segments, for instance) but to discard the “American” qualifier (Dempsey 1993). Another sizeable difference between the two networks—the only one that actually worked against TCM—turned out to be TCM’s reach. The mid-1990s regulatory atmosphere clamped down on MSO expansion, and channel capacity was limited. Under these circumstances TCM debuted in less than two million homes when its sister networks TBS and TNT had sixty million and fifty-nine million subscribers, respectively (Hettrick 1994). TCM’s ambitions were unimpeded, however, because of the rich Turner library—a resource that limited AMC’s programming slate.

When Turner’s networks did license films from other companies, those deals too affected AMC. For instance, Turner’s deals with MGM, UA, and Columbia prevented AMC from accessing titles from those studios (Dempsey 1995). Furthermore, a licensing agreement that AMC had with Turner for 150 RKO films was not renewed on expiration (Mifflin 1995). Another example illustrates not only the way in which AMC had to work around Turner but it also explains the shift in format that AMC would embrace in the years ahead. In 1995, AMC licensed a few hundred films from Warner Bros. for $20 million. AMC would be able to program the films exclusively but only periodically over the course of eight years (Dempsey 1995). In addition, the agreement meant that AMC’s combined licensing deals permitted it to access approximately 3,000 films from Warner, Universal, David Selznick, Paramount, Samuel Goldwyn, 20th Century-Fox, and RKO (Dempsey 1994, 1995). Significantly, the newly licensed films hailed from the 1950s through the 1970s. Turner Broadcasting owned the pre-1948 Warner Bros. library and refused to place these films on the open market. While AMC remained committed to its format of uncut, uninterrupted films, its definition of classic had expanded to accommodate the relatively newer films and the politics of ownership.

This was not the first time that Turner’s actions were linked to AMC’s operations. In August 1985, Turner attempted a hostile takeover of CBS Inc., which owned 50 percent of AMC at the time (Carter 1985). Later that same year Turner aborted a plan that would have allowed AMC to expand its operations. Prior to Turner’s involvement in this plan, Rainbow Media and MGM had struck a deal to give AMC access to MGM’s library. Acquiring this access was part of AMC’s strategy to convert from the premium cable tier to the basic cable tier. However, when Turner Broadcasting made a move to purchase MGM/UA, the company refused to allow MGM films to appear on basic cable; Turner wanted these films for his superstation, WTBS. Although AMC was denied access to the MGM library, the network did receive a handsome settlement from Turner and MGM in the amount of $50 million, which allowed it to continue fruitfully as a premium cable channel with no advertiser support (“MGM Film Dispute Is Settled” 1985).

Yet another entanglement occurred when Liberty Media tried to buy Cablevision and NBC’s stakes of AMC in 1993. Liberty’s aspiration initiated a series of maneuvers that resulted in Cablevision buying out Liberty Media’s 50 percent share. When
Liberty filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission prior to Cablevision’s buyout, it noted an “unnamed partner” in the potential deal—a partner that was widely believed to be Turner (Layne 1993). So, before Turner launched TCM, the company was eager to eliminate its competition, particularly because TCM’s initial penetration would be nowhere near AMC’s. In fact, even a year after TCM’s debut, its reach had grown to only three million households compared to AMC’s fifty-four million homes (Mifflin 1995).

Penetration rate notwithstanding, TCM was quickly praised as having “the world’s best classic film library” (Mifflin 1995). Despite AMC’s popularity, one common complaint was that the channel repeated at least one film several times in one day (Mifflin 1995). Before TCM, this was an inconvenience to be tolerated; no other channel did what AMC did. Once TCM arrived, the disparity in the sheer number of films offered by each network threatened to marginalize AMC. AMC’s savior remained its dominant subscriber numbers. The network was not content to stagnate, however.

AMC announced a spin-off channel, Romance Classics, in 1994, but a more telling indication that AMC was looking to extend its brand, experiment, and control its own content was the development in 1996 of an original scripted comedy entitled Remember WENN. Up to that point AMC’s original programming consisted of non-fiction programs thematically arranged to complement signature movies. The inspiration for this new scripted program, according to Wolynetz, was a series of promos the channel had aired in 1995 featuring “1940s Andrews-sisters type girls singing in harmony about AMC” in a “faux radio studio” (Vlad Wolynetz, personal communication). Created by Rupert Holmes, a playwright, novelist, composer, old-time radio enthusiast and TV novice, Remember WENN was a half-hour program set in a 1930s radio station. WENN simultaneously adhered to and departed from AMC’s brand. The series existed outside of the world of cinema, but it was a period piece that reinforced the style of dress and manner of speech that appeared in many of AMC’s movies. In a New York Times review of Remember WENN in 1996, John J. O’Connor wrote that the program “wouldn’t last much more than a week in the rough-and-tumble must-see shenanigans of network prime time. But AMC’s niche is just about perfect.” O’Connor’s point was prescient considering the degree to which cable is now viewed as a safe space that nurtures series with great patience. O’Connor went on to call WENN an “engaging alternative, which once was thought to be what cable is all about” (1996).

The turn to original scripted series marked a turning point for a tier of cable channels that primarily offered recycled material to paying customers. WENN’s budget was minimal, but it was the most expensive original program produced by AMC (Barron 1997). Its selling points were its novel subject matter and its commercial-free narrative flow. As cable series go, WENN had a respectable lifespan. The series lasted for four seasons and fifty-six episodes from 1996 to 1998. While O’Connor’s point about the competitiveness of broadcast television is well taken, Wolynetz points out that WENN might not survive on cable today: “the cable marketplace was so different. Every basic cable channel wasn’t trying to do Nip/Tuck. [It was a] very innocent, naïve, and very cute little show” (Vlad Wolynetz, personal communication).
After passing on the pilot of The Royale, AMC’s second original series, The Lot, continued the network’s strategy of crafting original programming to “give context to the movies” and, ultimately, to suit the brand (Grego 2001). AMC’s original documentaries like Hidden Hollywood III: Return to the 20th Century Fox Vaults chronicled the golden age of Hollywood, and The Lot, which premiered in 1999, dramatized that golden age. Like WENN, The Lot centered on a group of people working in the industry in the 1930s, only in this second series the industry was Hollywood. The Lot melded more organically with AMC’s programming format than WENN, but it only lasted for seventeen episodes from 1999 to 2001. According to Wolynetz, “As The Lot was being launched, the decision was made that AMC would go ad-supported . . . [AMC’s] way to prepare was to cancel all scripted programming” (Vlad Wolynetz, personal communication). AMC’s initial hope was, however, that The Lot would “drive viewership” to the rest of the network’s offerings (Frutkin 1999). That hope did not indicate any desire to invest in a slate of long-running original series. The series’ tiny budget, at one-quarter to one-half of a typical broadcast half-hour series, underscores the network’s financial situation as well as its priorities (Frutkin 1999).

From AMC’s brief, second outing into original scripted series, we can infer that the network was not trying to create appointment television as much as it was trying to extend its brand on the channel when it needed to fill time. It was a practical experiment, but it was not fully realized to anyone’s satisfaction. At the time AMC had a new competitor whose enviable content compensated for its minimal reach. TCM’s president once remarked that AMC’s escalation of original documentary and interview programs signified the network’s difficulty in “getting enough quality movies” to fill its programming day (Mifflin 1995). AMC’s then general manager, Kate McEnroe, defended AMC’s programming slate by describing it as “more than an inventory of product; it’s a sense of time and place” (Mifflin 1995). McEnroe believed that original programs about classical Hollywood maintained the brand. And because its original brand had been co-opted by TCM, AMC needed to fill its time wisely to compensate for the lopsided competition for “classic” films. We have already seen that the network modified its programming format by airing more contemporary films and by expanding into original programming. The destabilization of its original brand was, in fact, driving AMC to adjust its format yet again.

Phase III: AMC Accepts Advertising and Suffers an Identity Crisis, 1998-2006

The third phase of AMC’s history is marked by its entrance into the world of ad-supported content. As AMC tried to innovate in 1998 by launching an internet-based network called American Pop, it took another step back from its original brand by welcoming advertisements. While it may have appeared that AMC’s decision would inevitably lead to a standard advertiser-supported format, the network was careful to balance the realities of a commercial venture with the reverence it still held for its primary content. So when McEnroe, then president of AMC, announced that she
would open the doors to sponsors, she emphasized that the movies would not be interrupted by ads. Instead, sponsors would be integrated so that their appearance would not violate the brand in an overtly crass way. One company would sponsor a “vignette” about “classic cars”—a logical theme for the network that refused to depart entirely from its “classic movie” brand (Ross 1998). Tie-ins and merchandising would follow, and all of this would help AMC extend its brand and reach the “35-plus” demographic, according to McEnroe (Ross 1998).

AMC’s intention to maintain the integrity of the cinema on television eroded once more when, in October 2001, the channel began interrupting its films with commercial breaks “up to four minutes long” (Shales 2001). A vice president of AMC, Ellen Kroner, explained that the AMC audience demanded “newer, bigger movies,” which in turn commanded higher license fees (Shales 2001). It is interesting (or perhaps typical) that Kroner would blame the audience for the escalation of advertising when, in fact, the continuing problem of content ownership as well as the mounting pressure from advertisers had created the situation. As soon as license fees became prohibitive for AMC, and TCM towered over it with Turner’s mammoth library, the network was forced to welcome advertisers into the fold. Advertisers could not reach the proper demographic with Astaire and Rogers on the screen, so they pressured AMC to broaden the definition of “classic.” Seeking out newer titles to attract a younger audience meant that AMC had to pay more to license these films, especially because the new format relocated AMC to a market with more competitors for the same product. Higher prices demanded deeper pockets, which only advertising revenue could provide on the basic cable tier.

The brand crumbled further when AMC, which was accustomed to showing films forced to be family-friendly by Hollywood’s notorious Production Code Administration, began airing newer films that butted up against AMC’s policy to avoid “R-rated material” (Shales 2001). AMC’s commitment to airing uncut and uninterrupted films could only apply to the films that fell within its original definition of “classic.” In order to program advertiser-friendly contemporary films, AMC had to purchase the rights to movies already cut for TV. Yet another pillar of AMC’s brand was razed.

Not content to abandon classic movies entirely, AMC tried to launch a digital cable channel in 2002 that adhered to the original format—uncut, uninterrupted, commercial-free movies from the 1930s through the 1950s. That failed attempt accompanied news that AMC’s commercial breaks would expand from four to eight minutes per hour (Dempsey 2002). The following year, all of the changes that AMC had been forced to make actually threatened to sever its distribution agreement with Time Warner Cable (TWC). TWC filed suit against AMC in 2003 because, as its new name, AMC: TV for Movie People, suggested, its programming format had strayed too far from the one that originally bound AMC to TWC. Supporting TWC’s claim was a “content clause” in its contract with AMC that restricted AMC’s programming to movies from the 1960s and earlier (Dempsey 2003b). Indeed, by 2002, only 18.9 percent of AMC’s movies originated before 1960 (Dempsey 2005). Because AMC had executed a thorough and comprehensive format shift, TWC expressed concerns that it was now too
similar to many other cable networks. If AMC were to stay on TWC’s system (which accounted for eleven million of AMC’s eighty-seven million subscribers), the MSO would have the power to decrease the subscriber fees it paid to AMC, which stood at twenty cents. That TWC and TCM were corporate siblings may have weighed heavily on TWC’s actions. The TWC lawsuit followed an accounting scandal that resulted in the firings of fourteen AMC executives in June 2003, including Kate McEnroe, who had spearheaded the programming shift (Dempsey 2003a). In 2005 a New York judge found in favor of TWC, which weakened AMC’s power to negotiate for higher subscriber fees.

The industrial and leadership shake-ups were examples of internal strife, but the shifts in content that were visible externally were detrimental to AMC’s popularity. Wolynetz explains, “We were overbranded. We were so [Wolynetz’s emphasis] the black-and-white movie channel. Anything else was a disconnect to the audience” (Vlad Wolynetz, personal communication). This was a disorderly phase for AMC’s format, and the upheaval was exacerbated by the mass firings. Crisis made AMC ripe for even more change. Confusion at the top might have actually propelled AMC into another experimental phase.

**Phase IV: A Leadership Change and the Turn to Original Programming, 2006-Present**

If the third phase of AMC’s development was characterized by a wholesale identity crisis—one that encompassed a gradual programming shift, the introduction and escalation of advertising, and the toppling of upper management—then the fourth phase is colored by the recovery from that crisis and the ascendance of the new AMC, if not the new brand. 2006 and onward have been years of creative growth in original programming, even though the hiring of Charles Collier as general manager in September 2006 signaled an even greater commitment to commerce without all the “commercial clutter” (Lafayette 2006).

Collier, who had previously headed up ad sales at Court TV, ushered the network into an age of single sponsorship, merchandising, and product placement. Collier’s vision involved recontextualizing the bulk of AMC’s programming—new “classics”—in innovative ways. Movies could be grouped together into “franchises” that targeted specific demographics or met sponsors’ specific product-based needs, or they could be selected to establish high-end tentpoles to support original series (Lafayette 2007). These strategies centered on attracting advertisers to old and new products, while highlighting the fact that AMC included fewer commercial breaks than other basic cable channels.

Just before Collier assumed his post at AMC, the network had begun to align its identity with more original programming. Its first original movie/miniseries, *Broken Trail*, was the highest rated cable movie in 2006 and earned AMC its highest ratings ever (Schneider 2007). It earned sixteen Emmy nominations and won four, including one for outstanding miniseries. Wolynetz oversaw the production of *Broken Trail*, and
he argues that the failure of original documentaries pushed AMC back into scripted programming: “The documentaries [were] not pulling a big enough number. Even more than the ratings, they just weren’t branding us. The only place to go was to make dramas to fit in between the movies we show. . . . Broken Trail whetted the appetite because the potential was so clear” (Vlad Wolynetz, pers. comm.). Classic films had branded AMC in its early days, and the network hoped original dramas would brand this latest version of AMC.

Mad Men, created by Matthew Weiner (formerly of HBO’s The Sopranos), was AMC’s first original series since The Lot. Set in a Madison Avenue advertising agency in the 1960s, Mad Men seemed to reach back to AMC’s second phase; this program, with its period-specific detail, could have aired alongside WENN and The Lot in the commercial-free days. The presence of Mad Men during the advertiser-supported stage of AMC’s development highlights a key issue in the rise of original scripted series on cable. Without the burden of commercial interruptions or constraints on content, premium cable channels have developed series that some claim are television’s answer to the cinema. One of the factors that encouraged viewers to regard HBO series as “cinematic”—the lack of advertisements—was precisely the factor that AMC had embraced. Ironically, advertisements enabled AMC to venture into the expensive territory of original series—series that would rival HBO’s output.4

When Mad Men premiered in 2007, AMC reached ninety-one million households; the series’ first episode reached 1.6 million households (Crupi 2007; Gordon 2007).5 Mad Men’s average viewership in primetime was 1.05 million households (Dempsey 2008). Its programming crisis and legal entanglements behind it, the network reveled in Mad Men’s instant success marked by critical praise, respectable ratings, and an upscale audience. The significance of Mad Men to the health of dramatic series on television (and not just cable television) is clear. As the series that turned AMC’s fortunes around, Mad Men is equally important. Mad Men’s beauty, found easily in its storytelling, style, and cast, earned it a substantial number of awards that marked milestones for AMC. In 2008 Mad Men became the first basic cable series to win an Emmy for outstanding drama, beating out Damages (FX), Dexter (Showtime), Lost (ABC), Boston Legal (Fox), and House (Fox). The series went on to win the Emmy for Outstanding Drama four years in a row (2008-2011), which solidified AMC as the only basic cable network to attract those honors. Mad Men also won the Golden Globe for Best Television Series-Drama three years in a row (2008-2010). What stands out about Mad Men industrially is that it seems to have come out of nowhere. Apart from its period-specific subject, nothing about the series hints that it is an obvious product of AMC. This is especially evident when one considers AMC’s follow-up series.

How AMC would continue to form its slate of originals was revealed with the premiere of Vince Gilligan’s series Breaking Bad in January 2008. Unlike Weiner, Gilligan had no HBO credentials; he was best known for his work on the Fox series The X Files. But like Weiner, Gilligan launched Breaking Bad with no big stars and a sustainable premise: high school chemistry teacher with terminal cancer cooks crystal meth to provide for his family after his death. Unaware of Showtime’s
suburban-mom-becomes-pot-dealer-to-provide-for-her-family series Weeds, Gilligan shaped Breaking Bad into something that a few years earlier might have seemed possible only on premium cable. AMC had its second series and its second critical hit.

Critical attention aside, AMC’s eye for scripted drama has not fixed the problem of its floundering brand, which has been confused even further by its mass-appeal zombie series The Walking Dead, its more niche, female-led murder mystery The Killing, its 1860s drama Hell on Wheels, and its fanboy foray into reality TV Comic Book Men. However, it is worth asking if the strong cable brand is simply a hook that, while necessary at first, cannot trump a valuable product.

**It’s Not Embarrassing. It’s AMC.**

Our basic criteria is “could we take this show, book a movie theatre in New York, put it up on the big screen and not be embarrassed?” So far, I think we’ve achieved that. (Joel Stillerman, senior vice president of original production at AMC [quoted in Armstrong 2008])

I would like to conclude by underscoring the significance of AMC’s origins and trajectory. If, as Gardner and Levy proposed, the legitimate brand communicates constantly with the public and maintains stability over time, then AMC is a highly unlikely success story (1955). Begun as an affiliate sales company and taken over in 2006 by the former head of ad sales at Court TV, AMC’s history has been dictated by people who had no background in the development and creation of television content. In AMC’s first phase, the content supplied the brand. The strategy was that simple; AMC was the only twenty-four-hour classic movie channel around. As the content changed over the second and third phases, the brand—communicated most loudly by the tagline—became less focused. AMC’s 2011 tagline, “Story Matters Here,” prompts us to ask if the network has simply given up on branding itself in a meaningful way.

Other taglines have better encapsulated a channel’s identity: HBO’s “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO,” Showtime’s “No Limits,” FX’s “There Is No Box.” All three connote a tension between what has been the norm on television for decades and what is now possible on cable. They are indicative of a content-specific period, a mature and even progressive moment in the history of an industry. But still other taglines have offered the same vague assurances that AMC’s does. USA’s “Characters Welcome,” TNT’s “We Know Drama,” and TBS’s “Very Funny” point to specific genres and the building blocks of good TV, but they actively resist painting the networks as niche. For his part, Wolynetz summed up AMC’s tagline as “Guess what? We can do anything. We can tell any story” (Vlad Wolynetz, personal communication). Perhaps in the post-network era, AMC is forging ahead on the basis of strong content rather than slick marketing. Intense competition for eyeballs may explain the need for strong, succinct brands, but superior content clearly overrides the strength or weakness of a brand, tagline, or even a programming slate.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Boardwalk Empire’s pilot cost $18 million (Playing 2010). In an interview with The New York Times, HBO’s head of programming, Michael Lombardo, declined to divulge the production costs for Game of Thrones, but he did admit that the price tag was “certainly near the high end” for HBO (Itzkoff 2011).

2. According to the Federal Communications Commission, approximately sixty-six million households subscribed to cable in 1994, while approximately ninety-two million households subscribed to all manner of multichannel video programming distributors (MVPDs; Federal Communications Commission 2005).

3. Broken Trail’s debut reached 9.7 million viewers (Schneider 2007).

4. One Mad Men–specific advertising strategy that AMC pioneered was “MADvertising”—a method of introducing ads by inserting morsels of information about the subsequent product on a Mad Men–branded frame. For Wolynetz, “embroidering the placement of those ads” convinced advertisers “that Mad Men was a special show to be inside of” (Vlad Wolynetz, personal communication).

5. According to the Federal Communications Commission, in 2006 approximately ninety-five million households subscribed to all manner of MVPDs, and approximately sixty-five million of those households subscribed to basic cable (Federal Communications Commission 2009).

References


Bio

Deborah L. Jaramillo is Assistant Professor of Film and Television at Boston University. Her first book, Ugly War Pretty Package: How CNN and Fox News Made the Invasion of Iraq High Concept, was published in 2009. Her research focuses on the political, economic, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of television.