This book is dedicated to Everett Parker, whose life-long courageous struggle to compel the media to serve the public interest has most recently resulted in a new licensing agreement awarding community access to non-commercial, low-power FM radio broadcasting in the United States.

Critical Studies in Media Commercialism

Edited by
Robin Andersen and Lance Strate

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From Flick to Flack: The Increased Emphasis on Marketing by Media Entertainment Corporations

Matthew P. McAllister

Media practitioners may well remember May 1998 as the month of ‘Seinfeld versus Godzilla’. This designation is not because of the dramatic excellence of either the final episode of the popular NBC TV sitcom or the blockbuster Sony film. Both were uniformly trounced by critics. Rather, the competition between the two entertainment behemoths came in the form of massive publicity and marketing.

The last episode of Seinfeld, for instance, was promoted on the cover of numerous magazines months before it aired, including Time, Rolling Stone, and several covers of Entertainment Weekly, People, and TV Guide. Talk shows such as Charlie Rose, Live with Regis and Kathie Lee, and The Late Show with David Letterman devoted special interviews or segments to the show. A plotline in the rival ABC sitcom Dharma and Greg centred on the popularity of the final Seinfeld episode.

NBC itself touted the episode through promotions aired during other programmes and news segments discussing the show’s passing. Product advertisements mentioned the last episode, including an ad for Pond’s Clear Pore Strips (‘Bye-bye Seinfeld! With Jerry gone, use Thursday nights to get rid of blackheads.’) and a TV commercial for Macintosh declaring Jerry Seinfeld an innovator of Gandhi-esque stature.

Similarly, the producers of Godzilla found that ‘Size Does Matter’ not only for the monster, but also for the marketing campaign. Spending as much as $50 million on advertising (a record amount for a movie), Sony began running teaser previews in theatres a year in advance of the movie’s release (Eller 1998b; Welkos 1998b). The studio also used giant urban billboards to compare landmarks to the beast—‘His footprint is as big as Wrigley Field.’ Around 300 merchandisers, licensees and promotional partners signed on to sell the giant lizard’s likeness, including Taco Bell’s $60 million tie-in advertising campaign (Elliott 1998; Welkos 1998a).

And Jerry and Godzilla were not alone in their marketing visibility that summer. The promotional blitzes for Armageddon, The Truman Show, The X-Files movie and cable television networks like ESPN, among many others, were also impressive.

A major premise that justifies the existence of modern media systems in a democracy is the separation of media content from advertising. According to this premise, advertising—as the major funding system of the mass media—should not unduly influence the non-advertising content. The news stories, entertainment...
programmes, opinion pieces, and films are to be autonomous from the influence of any one group, and that includes advertisers. As media critic Ben Bagdikian describes this theoretical separation in the print media, 'It has been a sacred edict in official newspaper ethics that church and state — news and advertising — are separate and that when there is any doubt each is clearly labeled' (Bagdikian 1997: 163). Although this quotation refers to newspapers, entertainment as well as journalistic media have an obligation to build and maintain a wall between content decisions and advertising influence.

Without this separation, stories and images that are critical of specific advertisers, as well as advertising and commercialism generally, may be rarely if ever found. Conversely, pro-advertiser and commercial messages may find themselves inserted in the non-advertising media content as advertisers have too much influence over it. Its tone may be altered, as advertisers prefer media content that is light, non-disturbing, and with an emphasis on happy endings. Textual features of advertising — its look, pace, sounds — may be copied by other forms of media without the wall that divides (Andersen 1995; Bagdikian 1997; Baker 1994; McAllister 1996).

What happens, though, when a media company becomes an advertiser? How can one company build a wall between parts of itself?

This essay explores the growth of motion-picture and network-television marketing by mass-media conglomerates and the implications for such growth. I shall first explore the evidence for this expansion, then the reasons for it, and finally the implications such activity may have on the role of modern media in a democratic society.

The recent increase in entertainment marketing

The promotion of new films and television programmes is, of course, not new. The advertising of films in local media began practically with the birth of the film industry in the mid-1890s, and national advertising by the movie studios was occasionally used by 1915 and routinely used by the 1930s (Taeger 1990). Movie trailers — the coming attractions shown in cinemas — and public-relations tactics like opulent premieres, film celebrity magazines, and publicity stunts also were developed early in films' history (Taeger 1990; Hiebert, Ungurait, and Bohn 1991). Walt Disney showed in the 1950s how symbiotically created television programmes (The Mickey Mouse Club, Disneyland on ABC) can be used to promote films and other entertainment holdings like theme parks (Brooks and Marsh, 1995). The studios increasingly emphasized television advertising for 'event' films after 1975, when the success of Jaws illustrated the value of 'saturation' advertising (Hiebert, Ungurait, and Bohn 1991). In the 1970s and 1980s, films like Star Wars and Batman

paved the way for using merchandise and cross-promotional partners not just for additional revenue streams but also for publicity (Kaplan 1997; Meehan 1991).

With network television, on-air promotional spots have long been a routine technique. Originally such spots were done on film, often just by editing a previously shot scene from an episode; by the mid-1970s the advantages of video tape were being exploited, with original material increasingly produced specifically for on-air promotions. Print media like TV Guide and local television listings are also established tools for television marketing. The pressure to market television shows successfully increased as audience-ratings techniques became more sophisticated, as with the implementation of overnight ratings on the West Coast in the mid-1970s, and the demographically sensitive people-meter ratings in the 1980s (Cowles and Klein 1991).

But in recent years media conglomerates have placed even more emphasis on the marketing of entertainment films and programmes. This heightened emphasis can be illustrated in several ways. First, the amount of advertising money spent by entertainment conglomerates is significantly increasing. Possible ways to measure an increase include comparisons of advertising spending by media companies to the spending by earlier media companies and to advertisers in other industries. Tables 7.1 and 7.2 list the entertainment corporations among the Top 100 US advertisers, across all industries, by advertising dollars spent in 1987 and 1997, respectively. Comparing the two, it is obvious that entertainment corporations have become larger and more numerous. The average rank for entertainment advertisers in the Top 100 in 1987 was 61st, with these four entertainment corporations spending an average of $22.9 million on advertising (adjusted to match the 1997 inflation equivalent). In 1997, there were two more corporations listed in the entertainment category and the average rank for these six corporations was 31st, or twice as high as a decade earlier. In addition, the latter companies spent on average $757 million on advertising, or over three times as much as the earlier ones, even when the earlier average is adjusted for inflation.2 Looking at the growth in entertainment advertising from 1994 to 1995, the 14 per cent increase in entertainment advertising was surpassed by only one other industry, computers and electronics (Reina 1996).

Increased advertising for both film and network-television properties is largely responsible for the above increase. Studios spent nearly $1.7 billion on advertising in 1996, an increase of 20 per cent on the year before (Levin 1997a). The average wide-release 'event' movie budgets about $25 million for advertising (Jensen 1997b). The jump in advertising and marketing costs has prompted studio executives to wonder if these costs are 'galloping out of control' (Weintraub 1996), while Variety

2 Table 7.1 lists all corporations designated as 'Entertainment and Media' by Advertising Age for 1987, while Table 7.2 lists all corporations designated 'Movies and Media' for 1997. The trade journal did not include General Electric as a media company in 1987, but did in 1997, even though GE's purchase of RCA (and thus NBC) occurred in 1986. Even if GE were factored into the 1987 table, the average ranking for 1987 would be 57, and the average amount spent would be $237 million, still significantly below the 1997 figures of 31 and $737 million. Seagram, the owner of MCA/Universal, was not listed as a 'Movies and Media' company in the 1997 table. Obviously, some of the corporations that were included also have significant non-media holdings that factor into their advertising spending.
called the amount spent to market 1997 theatrical releases 'unprecedented' (Johnson and Petrikin 1997: 1).

Network television is also spending at exceptional levels to market itself. The networks spent as much as $500 million during fall 1996 to promote their new programmes (Elliott 1996), including an NBC spot for The Jeff Foxworthy Show that cost $240,000 to produce, a record for a network promo (Levin 1996b). TV networks use themselves as a medium for promotion. NBC allocated the equivalent of nearly $350 million of its own airtime for programme promos during the 1995–6 season (Dupree 1996). This figure probably increased for the next season. The number-one advertiser during the 1996 Olympic broadcasts was NBC, which aired 552 commercials for itself, more than the next two heaviest advertisers—Coca-Cola and General Motors—combined ('Leading Olympic advertiser? NBC', 1996). The networks also use other media. Their spending on billboards nearly tripled from 1991 to 1995 (Hudis 1996). For the fall 1998 season, ABC placed advertising stickers on 15 million bananas that were distributed nationwide (Egan 1998).

Besides the heavy promotion for individual shows, one buzzword for network promotion in the middle to late 1990s is 'branding', or the establishment through advertising of a network identity (Dupree 1996; Levin 1996b). By pounding the same advertising theme, the networks hope to establish a favourable image of themselves and the programming they provide. NBC attempted to capitalize on its mid-1990s ratings dominance through the slogan 'Must See TV'. CBS, the network of familiar faces like Bob Newhart, Bill Cosby, Gregory Hines, Bryant Gumbel and Candice Bergen, comforted viewers with 'Welcome Home'. The off-beat, yellow-motif 'TV Is Good' summers of 1997–98 campaign for ABC, at a $40 million price tag, attempted to woo younger viewers (Kim and McCarthy 1997).

However, the amount of money spent on 'measured' advertising by movie companies and television networks greatly underestimates their marketing activities. With both groups, perhaps a more significant source of promotion is their licensing and cross-promotional activities. Licensing involves the tie-in merchandise such as T-shirts, toys, and games that feature characters or other icons from a movie or TV show. Cross-promotion involves a joint advertising or promotional campaign with another marketer, such as a fast-food restaurant, in which often the ads are paid for by the non-media partner (McAllister 1996).

In 1992, the movie industry was buzzing about the licensing and cross-promotional deals of the anticipated Batman Returns. Based on the publicity generated by the licensing of video games and action figures and the cross-promotion with McDonald's (for Batman cups) and Choice Hotels, that movie generated the equivalent of $65 million in paid advertising, none of which Time Warner had to pay (Magiera 1992). Such a figure, impressive in 1992, would be seen as paltry five years later for such a high-profile release. With tie-in deals, the 1997 instalment of the action series Batman and Robin generated nearly twice as much free publicity, $125 million, as the earlier sequel (Bening 1997). And, pushing the envelope even farther, this franchise pales in comparison to Universal's The Lost World, for which $30 million was spent in advertising and marketing, but which generated the equivalent of $250 million in tie-in deals with Burger King, Mercedes-Benz, and General Mills (Jensen 1997a). Long-term deals between studios and non-entertainment marketers also point to the centrality of cross-promotion. Disney's ten-year deals with both McDonald's and General Motors ensure publicity through the year 2006 (Feder 1996; Gelsi 1996). As one studio executive explained, movie studies look for 'promotions that penetrate the culture' (Jensen, 1997a: 52).

CBS and NBC began systematic cross-promotional activities with advertisers in 1989, with ABC acquiescing in 1996 (Levin 1996a). The networks use such marketing tactics to tout both the premiere of the fall season and sweeps months (when local advertising rates are set). The latter goal has resulted in such stunts as the distribution of more than 38 million pairs of 3-D glasses in Wendy's (ABC) and Little Caesars Pizza (NBC) for the May 1997 sweeps (Schneider 1997).

Why has the entertainment industry turned so strongly to marketing activities in the 1990s? The answers have to do with changes in technology, production costs, and corporate ownership.

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TABLE 7.1 Advertising spending by entertainment corporations ranked among the top 100 advertisers for 1987

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall ranking</th>
<th>Corporation</th>
<th>Amount spent (US $ million)</th>
<th>Adjusted for 1997 inflation (US $ million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Walt Disney Co.</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Time Inc.</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>Warner Communications</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>MCA Inc.</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>648</strong></td>
<td><strong>914</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from 'Top 100 Advertisers by Primary Business' (1988).

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TABLE 7.2 Advertising spending by entertainment corporations ranked among the top 100 advertisers for 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall ranking</th>
<th>Corporation</th>
<th>Amount spent (US $ million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Walt Disney Co.</td>
<td>1,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Time Warner</td>
<td>1,013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sony Corp.</td>
<td>778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Viacom</td>
<td>745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>News Corp.</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>General Electric</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>4,543</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from 'Sales per Ad Dollar by Most Advertised Segment' (1998).
Reasons for increased entertainment marketing

New promotional media One reason for the increased emphasis on entertainment marketing is the implementation or maturation of different media that both need promotion and can be used for promotion. The continued increase in the number of cable channels, for example, means more specialization. These specialized channels then seek to 'brand' themselves with individual promotional identities and can deliver demographically targeted audiences to other advertisers, including entertainment firms (Weinraub, 1996). ESPN's award-winning This Is SportsCenter, which has been called 'felliniesque', features irreverent and hip promos with a mock documentary feel (Jensen 1996). Other cable channels have sought similar promotional success. As one executive for the Discovery Channel explained, 'We got to the point where we discovered that we were in the brand-building business, not the cable business' (Murphy 1997: 16). As regards using cable as an advertising medium, from 1995 to 1996 Viacom increased its advertising spending on cable networks by over 64 per cent, Walt Disney Co. by over 71 per cent, and Time Warner by over 108 per cent (Top 25 cable networks advertisers, 1997). Even the networks use their cable competitors to promote programmes. Both NBC and CBS have formed cross-promotional deals with Comedy Central to market the broadcast networks' situation comedies (McAllister 1996).

Video tapes have also become a pre-eminent source of revenue and promotion. The 1986 video of Top Gun featured the first cross-promotional ad on a video tape for a movie, in this case for Pepsi; the video ad was worth $8 million in promotional perks to Paramount, Top Gun's studio (Wasko 1994). Videos now routinely include trailers for other movies and even television shows. As an example of the second use, a promotion for ABC's 1996 Saturday Morning line-up appeared on the video of Toy Story (Ross 1996). Movie studios increasingly have an incentive to promote the sale and rental of video tapes as well. Although the film industry made $5.9 billion at the 1996 box office, the rental and sales of videos generated around $16 billion (Matzer 1997). Such revenue potential explains why Paramount spent $50 million to promote the video release of Titanic, more than it had spent to promote the cinema release (Fitzpatrick 1998).

A third medium that has increased both the need for promotion and the venues for promotion is the Internet. Advertising Age, the industry trade journal, marks October 1994 as the birthdate of Internet advertising with the creation of the sponsored HotWired web site (Williamson 1996). Most event films now require their own Internet location, often with extremely designed games and graphics, to promote the film. The Game, a 1997 Polygram film, was promoted through an elaborate Internet web site that drew $80,000 hits a day (Jensen, 1997). ESPN's SportsZone receives about 20 million hits a week, and is among the top ten of all Internet sites in advertising revenue (Jensen 1996). However, SportsZone is also heavily advertised itself on ESPN and ESPN2. Disney is a heavy advertiser on the Internet, spending as much as $100,000 a month for 'banner' placement on Internet search engines (Rich 1996).

Production costs, production glut An additional factor in the growth of entertainment marketing is the increased cost, and increased competition, of mainstream films and network television programmes.

With movies, this means that production for studio releases is getting more expensive, and therefore more economically risky, while competition for screen space has become fierce. Movie-makers have found themselves in a classic Catch 22. To secure financing, they must build 'bankable' elements into their sales pitches. Unfortunately, such bankable elements—big stars, action adventure scenes, elaborate special effects—are expensive, and so increase the price of movie-making. As Table 7.3 shows, from the early 1970s to the late 1990s the costs of producing and marketing a mainstream studio film have increased tenfold, after adjusting for inflation, from $7.5 million in 1971 to $75.6 million in 1997. Ten movies released or in production in 1997 had production costs over $100 million, including the $200 million price tag for Titanic (Johnson and Petrakin 1997; Weiner 1997). As one Fox executive said about putting together the proposed budgets for films, 'Every day I have two choices. One is to make a series of absolutely insane deals and the other is to make no movies at all' (Masters 1996: 58).

What exacerbates the financial risk of these costs is the high demand for screen space. The number of movies released by the major studios rose from 141 in 1992 to 212 in 1995 (Black, Bryant, and Thompson, 1998). Wide releases, or movies that are released on more than 3,000 cinema screens, have also increased (Klady 1997). This means that producers feel more pressure to perform well quickly—such as having a big opening weekend—to keep their many cinema managers satisfied and their movies on the screen.

Advertising and marketing are perceived as the way to do this. The studios cite research showing that 80 per cent of decision-making about motion pictures is influenced by TV ads (Jensen 1997b). Because so many films are based on the same premise (big stars surrounded by special-effects action), saturation advertising is needed to differentiate one movie from another. Ironically, though, the use of heavy advertising to ensure a big opening weekend adds to the glut of movies. By using expensive national advertising, studios increase the need to push for a wide release to make the ad campaign cost efficient (Hiebert, Ungurait, and Bohn 1991). So the wide release is viewed as justifying large marketing campaigns, and large marketing campaigns are viewed as justifying the wide release.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cost (US $ million)</th>
<th>Adjusted for 1997 Inflation (US $ million)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>56.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>75.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Adapted from Black, Bryant, and Thompson, 1998: 158.
**Adapted from Hart (1998).
Network television is facing similar competition and cost issues, raising the need for heavy advertising as a strategy for economic predictability. For the first time in television history, the Big Three networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) saw their combined share drop below 50 per cent in the 1996–7 season (Levin 1997b). With the increased popularity of cable networks and the relatively new broadcast networks (Fox, UPN and WB), a traditionally comfortable oligopolistic TV network system is not quite so comfortable for the Big Three.

This ratings competition has prompted production costs to rise, as the broadcast and cable networks look to provide 'prestige' or flashy programming for bored viewers. The 1996 season saw per-episode fees in the $1 million range for new, untested sitcoms, but ones that featured such stars as Michael J. Fox, Bill Cosby, Ted Danson, and Arsenio Hall (Flint 1996a). In order to keep the top-rated ER, NBC agreed to pay $53 million per episode in 1998, nearly twice the previous record for a television series (Carmody 1998). High-profile motion pictures command top dollar for their network television debut. The Fox network spent $80 million for the television rights to The Lost World, the most at that time for the TV rights to a film (Rice and Higgins 1997). Sports programming is also increasingly expensive. Fox, ABC, CBS, and ESPN shocked the television and sports industries with a collective $7.8 billion deal for the rights to broadcast National Football League games through 2006, double the amount that the League had got in its previous contract (Shapiro and Farhi, 1998). Similarly, CBS paid $1.7 billion for the rights to the NCAA men's basketball tournament through the year 2002, and NBC's exclusive broadcast coverage of the Olympics from 1998 to 2008 will cost the network $3.6 billion in fees (Schlosser 1997). These fees are only for the rights to the broadcasts. The costs of the actual production are additional. Cable and broadcast networks, seeking to recoup such costs through advertising revenues and to prevent further ratings erosion, turn to increased advertising and marketing.

Corporate synergy A final factor that has led to the increased emphasis on entertainment marketing is the mega-corporate context of these studios and networks. Conglomerates like Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, and News Corp. have built their media empires upon the philosophy of corporate synergy, whereby the whole of the corporation is greater than the sum of the parts. The conglomerates acquire smaller organizations that complement and can contribute to the other holdings of the corporation.

Just taking Disney's sports holdings (a relatively small part of the entertainment conglomerate) as an example, the corporation owns ABC's Monday Night Football and that network's rights to other sports; the Mighty Ducks hockey team in Anaheim, CA; the Anaheim Angels baseball team; four US cable sports networks (ESPN, ESPNews, ESPNewsN, and ESPN Classic); two international cable networks (ESPN Latin America, ESPN Pacific Rim); the ESPN Radio Network (with 420 affiliates), ESPN SportsZone Internet site, ESPN Sports Club in Walt Disney World, and ESPN Magazine (Jensen, 1996). The strategy is that each of these holdings exploits and is exploited by the others.

Media critics have raised serious concerns about the control of information, diversity of information, and impact upon democracy of the media megacorporations (Aufferheide et al. 1997; Bagdikian 1997; McAllister 1996; McChesney 1997; Meehan 1991). Corporate executives, obviously, are excited about the synergistic possibilities. When the same corporation owns related outlets, they can use each other to move content and promote themselves. Along these lines, the synergistic corporate ownership of media outlets has encouraged increased entertainment marketing activities in at least four ways.

The first way is that one corporate holding may be encouraged to buy advertising on another. Although certainly such ad buys have to achieve the goals of the advertiser, when advertising is kept in-house so is the revenue. In the mid-1990s, News Corp. subsidiaries increased their spending on the Fox TV network by nearly 300 per cent (Mandese 1997). In a similar vein, the Disney-owned ABC promoted its 1996 children's line-up with advertising in Disney Adventures, Disney Magazine, direct mailings to Disneyland and Disney World annual pass-holders, and preview guides distributed in Disney retail outlets (Ross 1996).

A second, more significant incentive is the creation of synergistic licensing deals. As Meehan (1991) explains, corporate buy-outs often deplete a corporation's cash assets, and one advantage of synergistic ownership is that the development of content is made more cost-efficient as the same characters, stories, and symbols can be moved through a variety of corporate holdings. Thus, cross-promotion activities are enhanced when two media companies are owned by the same parent. One of the most successful early examples of this was Warner Brothers' Batman in 1987, when the conglomerate (pre-Time Warner) used such holdings as Warner Books, Warner Records, and DC Comics to create both alternative streams of revenue and multimedia publicity for the original movie (Meehan 1991).

In the late 1990s, such activity is a corporate given (McAllister 1996). One Columbia executive says that 'We look in our own backyard first. Then we look to see if other kinds of things are there that we could do with advertisers' (Sharkey 1994: 23). The connection between books and films offers an illustration. Harper-Collins publishing, owned by News Corp., has an office on the Fox movie studio lot, also owned by News Corp., and has published such News Corp. properties as X-Files books and calendars. Disney's Hyperion Press awards authors bonuses if the authors sell rights to their books to other Disney divisions (Petrikin 1996).

In such licensing deals, a formal contract details the financial arrangement defining the licensing activity, even when it is between subsidiaries of the same conglomerate. A third way corporate ownership increases entertainment marketing—promotional plugs in content—involves no such official document. This form tends to be influenced more by a corporation's public relations departments than by its advertising departments, and affects the news/information divisions as well as the entertainment divisions. Stories about fictional or real 'Twisters' appeared on the cover of the Time-Warner-owned Time and Entertainment Weekly in May 1996, the same month the Warner Brothers' movie Twister was released in cinemas (Synergy 1996). Episodes of the ABC's sitcoms Roseanne, Step By Step, and Boy Meets World in 1996 were set on Walt Disney World during that park's twenty-fifth anniversary (Mandese 1997).
Finally, a last way that corporate synergy may increase entertainment marketing is through the corporation’s overall promotional ethos. Conglomerates like Disney are promotionally minded and expect their holdings to be promotionally minded as well. Such philosophies can filter throughout the corporation, influencing organizational policies to be more favourable to marketing activities. For years ABC resisted establishing cross-promotional deals with advertisers. At one point in the early 1990s, Mark Mandala, the network president, even publicly attacked the idea of cross-promotional deals with advertisers and called for less commercial time on television (Brown 1992). Four years later, in a clear sign of new owner Walt Disney Co.’s influence on the Alphabet web, the network announced it would seek cross-promotional tie-ins with advertisers. This move puts ABC more in line with Disney’s corporate philosophy. As one advertising executive asked, ‘How can you not have marketing tie-ins when you’re a division of Disney?’ (the above two quotations from Levin 1996a: 39).

This discussion has focused on the nature of media ownership, but to a lesser degree the above incentives also apply to cooperative production deals between media giants. McChesney (1997) points out that the eight largest media conglomerates have joint ventures with an average of four other mega-media conglomerates and many more with smaller firms. Such joint ventures include co-production or distribution of films between studios, such as the cooperation between Fox and Paramount on Titanic (Brodie and Busch 1996); and of television shows between studios, such as Warner and Universal’s Cloak and Dagger, aired briefly on ABC in 1997 (Stanley 1996). Like ownership synergy, joint-production arrangements encourage cross-promotion and the widespread use of both conglomerates’ resources to market the product.

Given the growth of entertainment marketing and the reasons for it, what are some possible implications of this growth? How might the stress on marketing activities affect the kind of ideas we as audiences receive? The next section focuses on three related implications: the increase in high-concept entertainment, the increase of advertising, and the blurring of advertising into non-advertising content.

**Implications of increased entertainment marketing**

**Privileging the promotionally friendly** One implication of the emphasis on entertainment promotion is that movies and TV programmes that are easy to promote—those ‘high-concept’ entities whose plot can be boiled down to a thirty-second spot—may be given the green light much more easily than more complex but also more promotionally difficult material.

With film, this may discourage the adult-oriented, character-study movie. As one Fox executive noted, ‘They are not the easiest concepts to digest from a trailer or one-sheet’ (Brodie and Busch 1996: 85). As a result, the studios may be more eager to promote movies that have visually dramatic messages such as ‘Giant Monster Destroys America’ or ‘Meteor Hits Earth’. These messages are digestible. Even actor preference may be affected by promotion. Some Hollywood stars avoid modestly budgeted films and lean toward more high-concept ones, as the latter will be a high priority for the studio’s marketing machine (Brodie and Busch 1996: 85). Although other economic factors certainly have encouraged the prominence of ‘super-blockbusters’—such as their ease of translation for international markets and attractiveness to movie-going teenagers—the marketing niche of these films is also relevant.

The pressure to create ‘event’ television episodes is also promotionally driven. In the search for marketing hooks, producers of TV series are encouraged by the network to come up with ‘gimmick’ episodes. Television viewers were inundated with such episodes in 1997, especially during sweeps periods. The episodes took the form of live production (ER); reverse chronological storytelling (Seinfeld); musical numbers (The Drew Carey Show, Chicago Hope); theme nights (like NBC’s ‘Blind Date Monday’ in fall 1997); 3-D episodes (Third Rock from the Sun); and cross-overs from different or old programmes (Homicide’s characters on Law and Order) (Berger 1997). The episodes are then highly promoted, as such promotion becomes simpler and more immediately attention-getting. It is easier to highlight with a soundbite an episode produced in 3-D than solid storytelling and good characterization.

The stress on event films and event TV shows has implications for both quality and creator autonomy. High-concept films become less a compelling human drama and more a roller-coaster ride. Focusing on the television ‘event,’ one critic bluntly argues, ‘Shows that are based on stunts and novels are usually awful’ (Berger 1997: AR47). Television creators may feel that they have no choice but to generate technological gimmicks or integrate stunts into the plots to satisfy the networks. They want their shows promoted. As one producer said, ‘I suppose you have the option to say no, but it’s probably not a feasible option’ (Berger 1997: AR41).

**More ads** A second implication of the increase in entertainment marketing in the 1990s is the overall increase in advertising that viewers experience. Media users are exposed to less content and more advertising. Television especially highlights this increase.

The number of TV programme promos has increased since the 1980s. One study found that ABC aired around 7,000 promos for its programmes in 1990, nearly twice what it had produced a decade before (cited in Eastman and Otterson 1994). A more recent study, summarized in Table 7.4, found that, when compared to 1991, three of the four major networks had increased the time for programme promos in prime time, devoting about four and a half minutes per hour to touting their own programmes (Fleming 1997). A third study found that advertising and promotion time tends to be even higher during local news, late-night and daytime programming, reaching nearly twenty minutes in the last slot (Farhi 1998).

In fact, Table 7.4 *underestimates* the number of promos in primetime network television. Two common genres in primetime TV, news magazines, and sport include many promos within the programmes themselves. ABC’s Monday Night Football routinely offers presenter Al Michaels previewing the network’s...
Table 7.4 Time devoted to programme promotion and product advertising per hour. Four largest broadcast networks in prime time, November 1991 and November 1996

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<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>3:50</td>
<td>9:00</td>
<td>12:50</td>
<td>3:44</td>
<td>11:26</td>
<td>15:10</td>
<td>+2:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>3:49</td>
<td>11:03</td>
<td>14:52</td>
<td>4:25</td>
<td>11:40</td>
<td>16:05</td>
<td>+1:13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Fleming (1997).

Wednesday night line-up; the anchors on primetime news magazines similarly tout forthcoming programmes before going to break. As will be shown in more detail below, much of the media content not coded by the above study as ‘promotion’ may have been influenced by entertainment marketing. Just about any ad-free space is viewed as fair game for promotion. In 1994, NBC began a promotional unit called ‘NBC 2000’ which implemented such strategies as the placement of programme promotions on a split screen at the end of a programme whilst the credits for that programme go by (Mandese 1994). Now other networks do the same.

This increase in programme promotion has been accompanied by an increase in product advertising. The study summarized in Table 7.4 shows that time devoted to product commercials on the four biggest broadcast networks increased. The combination of promos and product advertising on all networks in 1996 reached ‘an all time high’ (Fleming 1997: 19). At least a small part of the increase in product advertising may be due to the increase in entertainment marketing. Spending on TV ads for theatrical films increased by 35 per cent from 1995 to 1996 (Levin 1997a).

If the television networks are increasing the number of promotions for their programmes and advertisements for consumer products, something must be being squeezed out. Time devoted to Public Service Announcements PSAs and the programmes themselves has decreased in this enhanced promo-commercial environment. PSAs have decreased from 1991 (an average of eight seconds per hour) to 1996 (six seconds per hour) on the four largest broadcast networks. Fox, which in 1996 devoted four and a half minutes per hour to self-promotion and over eleven and a half minutes per hour to product commercials, designated two seconds per hour to PSAs. UPN averaged zero seconds of PSAs in 1996 (Fleming 1997).

Although many advertisements are occasionally entertaining, they are not the primary reason why viewers participate in media consumption. Viewers watch for the programmes. A common argument from broadcast television executives is that television is ‘free’ to viewers. As they point out, unlike subscription-based media, broadcast television is not ‘pay-per’. However, to assume therefore that TV is free also assumes that viewers’ time is not valuable, because viewers pay for TV with their time. For every forty-five minutes of programme, we have to tolerate fifteen minutes of commercials. Hally (1987) even goes so far as to argue that a TV viewer is a type of ‘labourer’ in the political economy of television. Viewers ‘work’ by watching commercials in exchange for a ‘salary’ consisting of entertainment and information programming. Applying this metaphor to the current discussion, television is now demanding increased productivity with an accompanying cut in pay! In the 1990s, time devoted to programmes like situation comedies has decreased by one to two minutes on each of the national networks (Flint 1996, 1997). Even if one rejects the labour metaphor, the above increase still highlights the increased time that viewers must spend with explicitly promotional media if they are to watch network television.

**Ads embedded in media content** I began with a discussion of the wall between media content and advertising. A major effect of increased entertainment marketing is to wear this wall down. Such erosion has occurred both because media content is looking more like advertising and because advertising is looking more like media content. In this section I shall focus on the first half of this trend.

Both information media content and entertainment media content can become more ad-like when media systems self-promote. This trend is manifested in three ways: product placement, synergistic corporate promotion, and the piggybacking of media products on the promotional efforts of other media products.

First, when entertainment marketers establish cross-promotional partnerships with advertisers, a major benefit the entertainment companies receive is the publicity provided by the cross-promotional advertiser. But the advertisers want something too. They want the ‘glamour’ of being associated with Hollywood icons and access to the audiences of these icons. These goals may be achieved through product placement deals, often a major clause in cross-promotional contracts.

Product placement occurs when brand-name products appear conspicuously in films or television programmes in exchange for economic or promotional compensation. Product placement has been much discussed by critical scholars (see Andersen 1995; Fuller 1997; McAllister 1996; Miller 1990; Wasko 1994), often stressing this practice as an alternative source of revenue for film and of advertiser goodwill for television. However, as important as the revenue—if not more so—is the publicity for entertainment corporations that accompanies the practice. As media companies emphasize the marketing benefits of cross-promotion, they are willing to offer themselves as advertising vehicles. One 1996 trade-journal article argues that as a result of the growth of cross-promotional alliances ‘there’s no doubt we’ll be seeing more big brand names woven into the fabric of TV and film scripts’ (Matzter et al.: 59). Indeed, talent agencies like William Morris, which traditionally broker deals for the likes of Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts, have begun representing marketers like Pepsi and MNB America Bank hoping to integrate them into the biggest movies and TV programmes, just as they would the biggest Hollywood star (Johnson 1996).

Examples of product placement in movies and television programmes are common. Kellogg’s cereals appeared in the kitchen of Seinfeld at the same time as Jerry Seinfeld and other NBC stars appeared on 155 million boxes of cereal (Andersen 1995; McAllister 1996). When Mercedes-Benz promoted The Lost World at its car dealerships and in its print advertising, its new M-Class all-activity vehicle was being chased on screen by T.rexes (Jensen 1997a). Val Kilmer’s title character in the
movie *The Saint* drove a Volvo C70 coupé, as Volvo ads explained (Gelsi 1997). BMW ads, on the other hand, bragged that their car was the choice of James Bond in *GoldenEye*, the superspy also appeared in globally distributed Heineken point-of-purchase displays, while he crashes a car into a Heineken truck in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Arndorfer 1997). Ray-Ban sunglasses helped save the world in *Men in Black*, as the ads for the product bragged (Jensen 1997b).

With the routine placement of products in entertainment as a source of revenue and publicity, critics wonder about the degree to which this activity influences media content. Product placers have sued when a scene featuring a product ended up on the cutting-room floor, and other companies are selective about the proper 'environment' for their product's cinematic appearances (Wasko 1994). Scenes added to spotlight products, happy endings, movies set in the present, and a general pro-commodity/consumption orientation are some of the occurrences that a reliance on product placement may encourage (Wasko 1994; Miller 1990).

Besides product placement, a second factor of entertainment marketing that has encouraged media content to take on characteristics of advertising is the synergistic pressure for one media product to promote another media product with the same corporate owner. When a media corporation owns a television network, a movie studio, sports teams, magazines, and other communications holdings, it can use one subsidiary to promote another. Television provides many clear examples of how this promotional strategy may pervade programme content.

Sometimes this promotion manifests itself in trivial references in one programme to another programme, both owned by the same corporate parent. In the 1996 season premiere of *Murphy Brown*, one character, network executive Stan Lessing, is caught watching an actual programme by a network rival, the WB's *Pinky and the Brain*. 'It's funny,' justifies Lessing (Elliott 1996). How can this be an example of synergy, given that *Murphy Brown* is a CBS programme? *Murphy Brown* is produced by Warner Brothers television, a Time Warner sibling to the WB.

Sometimes this promotion manifests itself in whole plotlines, as illustrated by a May 1997 episode of *The Parent 'Hood*, a programme on the WB Network. Eight-year-old Nicholas decides to submit an entry to an essay contest with the theme 'Why I Love Bugs Bunny'. The airing of the episode, besides its sweeps-month date, coincided with the release of the Bugs Bunny commemorative stamp, and the first prize in the contest is a visit by Bugs Bunny (or at least someone in a Bugs Bunny suit) and a postcard-size replica of the stamp. Nicholas wins the contest, but only because another character in the show, the adult Wendell, writes the essay for him. When Bugs Bunny and the judge in the contest (a Time Warner executive!) show up at Nicholas's house to award him the price, Nicholas confesses that he did not write the essay.

The confession scene revolves around pure adoration of Bugs. Nicholas tells the judge why he really loves Bugs Bunny: 'When I started first grade, I was really, really scared. But then I just thought of Bugs. He isn't scared of anything. Even when Elmer Fudd tries to shoot him, he just kisses him on the nose and says, "What's up, Doc?" I didn't kiss anyone on the nose, but I made a whole lot of friends. And I owe it all to Bugs Bunny.' Despite the messy issue of the plagiarism, Nicholas neverthe-

less wins the contest. Bugs Bunny is still, of course, a heavily licensed character, with merchandise sold in Warner Brothers stores and other outlets and appearances in movies like *Space Jam, Looney Tunes* merchandise, in fact, generated $2 billion in revenue in 1994 (Curan, 1995). The plotline for *The Parent 'Hood* thus became a Warner Brothers love-fest, in which one Time Warner product was used to promote another.

Sometimes this promotion manifests itself in whole programmes. An elaborate example is ABC Saturday Morning television during the 1996–7 season. *The Mighty Ducks* is an animated TV series about a team of ice-hockey-playing alien ducks who fight crime and battle against the evil character Dragauaus. The series was also shown in syndication and a direct-to-video movie-length version is available for purchase, as are Mattel toys featuring *Mighty Ducks* characters.

The level of corporate promotion that sparked this programme is amazing. The cartoon toys were, in essence, a commercial for *The Mighty Ducks* multi-commodity franchise. *The Mighty Ducks* was originally a 1992 cinema film which spawned two sequels—a series, not coincidentally, known for its successful product placement (Fuller 1997). All three films are available for sale on video, and are shown on pay-cable via the Disney Channel. The Mighty Ducks is also the name of an Anaheim-based ice-hockey team owned by Disney. The cartoon Ducks are, like the real team and Disneyland, located in Anaheim. One episode of the cartoon series guest-starred the likeness and voice of Guy Hebert, the goalie for the real hockey team. The opening sequence of the cartoon features a song that says the name 'Mighty Ducks' nine times. The uniform logo is the same for the movie, the NHL team, and the cartoon team. In addition, licensed merchandise (jerseys, hats) with this logo is sold in sports outlets and Disney stores. *The Mighty Ducks* cartoon, then, is an obvious example of Disney using its children's programming expertise to cultivate brand loyalty for future adult sports fans.

Another Disney programme created to promote Disney holdings is *espn's NFL Prime Monday*, aired during the 1997–8 football season. It was essentially a ninety-minute lead-in to a programme on another channel, ABC's *Monday Night Football* (*MNF*). The whole point of the programme was to analyse the game, and to inform viewers what to watch for during the ABC broadcast. Personalities were shared between *NFL Prime Monday* and the *MNF*. The *Prime Monday* host 'interviewed' Dan Dierdorf, one of the trio of announcers on *MNF*. Later in the programme, Chris Berman, the *espn* celebrity and host of *MNF*’s halftime show, was also spotlighted, but on the *MNF* rather than the *espn* set. And in an even more obvious promotional plug, *NFL Prime Monday* asked a trivia question (such as 'Which offensive lineman holds the record for most career yardage?') which was then answered on ABC's *MNF*. In the synergistic world of corporate television, audience 'flow' is now structured to be a multiple-channel experience.

The pressure to promote entertainment programmes on the same network or within the same corporation also affects news programming. Not only was NBC the heaviest promoter during the Atlanta Olympics, but it was also the heaviest promoter of the Olympics, the most frequently covered news story on NBC for 1996, though not even in the top ten stories of the year for the other broadcast networks...
(Herman and McChesney 1997). The network morning news programmes have since their beginnings been promoters of the network primetime schedule, and this practice continues today. A January 1998 instalment of CBS News Saturday Morning featured host Susan Molinari3 interviewing actor John Dye of that network’s Touched by an Angel; when Matt Lauer of NBC’s Today Show interviewed John Lithgow on an October 1997 morning, the ‘hook’ of the story was that Third Rock from the Sun had moved to a new slot.

Part of the reason the final Seinfeld was such a publicity monster may have been that it plugged into the promotional apparatuses of two news-oriented corporations. GE/NBC was able to promote the show with news reports on NBC (via The Today Show, Dateline and NBC Nightly News) and various programmes on CNBC and MSNBC. Nearly twenty-seven minutes of news time of the 12 May 1998 Dateline, well over half of the total, was devoted to the last Seinfeld. Similarly, Time Warner owns Castle Rock Entertainment, the production company that made Seinfeld. The corporation aired numerous stories on its subsidiary CNN as well as cover stories in Time, Entertainment Weekly and People, magazines that the corporation also owns. The pressure to publicize increases such practices.

A last way that media content may take on the look of advertising because of entertainment marketing is the ratings benefits one media entity siphons from another through shared publicity. The ‘plugola’ that occurs when local stations create news stories for their eleven o’clock news around a highly publicized network programme or made-for-TV movie may be the clearest example of this (Benson and Alden 1995; Waxman 1996). As newsrooms are bombarded with increased public relations information about a hot movie or series, especially from the station’s own network, and can exploit the publicity efforts of these entertainment products, they are more tempted to create stories around these efforts.

Such activity occurred with the much-hyped 1997 live season premiere of ER. The local affiliate in Roanoke, VA, connected not just one but two news stories to this episode, one the night before the episode and one the night after. ‘News Channel 10 gives you a behind-the-scenes look at NBC’s ER, where they’re preparing for their live one-hour show tomorrow night,’ enthused the local news anchor. The promo was accompanied by the music of ER, scenes of actors rehearsing a scene, and a brief soundbite from actor George Clooney. The second story was advertised as even more ER-like, and also piggybacked off the network’s promotional efforts. In the on-air promotions for this story, the affiliate copied the look of the network’s ER promotion, editing in segments of the promotion, tinting the reporters’ camera resolution to look like the promotion, and even appropriating the language of the promotion. Trying to duplicate the ‘work without a net’ feel of the special episode, a reporter breathlessly asked viewers to ‘join me after NBC’s live broadcast of ER where we’ll be in an actual emergency room where events happen unrehearsed and anything can happen’. This promo was aired before and during the ER broadcast.

One study of a New York City affiliate found eleven and a half minutes of ‘plugola’ in an hour-long local 5 p.m. newscast (Benson and Alden 1995). Such activities are used to increase the ratings of the local news, exploiting the heavy promotional efforts of the networks and movie studios. At the very least, such activities skew the content of news towards entertainment-oriented topics, letting the networks and other entertainment organizations influence the news agenda. But another effect is the further blurring of advertising and media content, made especially ubiquitous by the complementary trend of the use of media characters and symbols in product advertising.

Media content embedded in advertising As noted above, when advertisers cross-promote with entertainment corporations, they are not being philanthropic; they want their products promoted as well, and often demand access to the symbols of the programmes/movies. One manifestation of this demand is product placement. Another is the use of entertainment symbols in the product advertisers’ cross-promotional ads. An effect of this appropriation is that advertisements for such activities often look like programme promos, or even the programmes/movies themselves.

Sometimes what the advertiser wants is simply a scene or two from the movie to edit into the cross-promotional ads. The advertiser can then construct a faux dialogue between the commercial’s narrator and the movie scenes. In a summer 1997 Sprint/Men in Black tie-in commercial, for instance, the narrator touted a special offer whereby the viewer could receive a special long-distance rate (Sprint is a long-distance phone service provider) and free Men in Black movie tickets. ‘You can see it for free,’ said the narrator, and Will Smith’s character, in a scene interspersed from the movie, responded, ‘What’s the catch?’ The use of scenes of the movie was so strong that the commercial at first appeared to be a movie trailer rather than an ad paid for by Sprint.

Other cross-promotional ads take the appropriation of entertainment symbols a step further by producing new footage featuring movie and television characters, rather than just using existing scenes. Here, the entertainment icons truly become characters in the commercials. A tie-in commercial that aired in 1997 presented two characters attacked by a T rex even as one character admired The Lost World/Burger King watch of the other. The appearance of the dinosaur seemed to have been filmed specifically for the commercial, and was not just from a scene from the movie. Another example pushes this promotional cooperation even further. During the re-release of Star Wars in early 1997, a cross-promotional commercial for Pepsi was aired. In a very appropriate symbol for the type of cooperation between product advertisers and media creators, it portrayed Darth Vader literally reaching through a movie screen to grab hold of a Pepsi. And such original product-pitching by Hollywood icons is no longer limited to computer-animated characters. Pierce Brosnan, the suave 007 in Tomorrow Never Dies, replayed his role in a Visa commercial to cross-promote the film (Busch 1997).

Such manipulation of entertainment signs also occurs in cross-promotion and licensing advertising involving television characters. The cast of Friends appeared in Diet Coke ads, essentially playing the characters they do on TV (Benezra and

3 Molinari is an example of the blurring of the cross-pollination of politicians as media celebrities, as discussed in the introduction to this book.
Loom children’s underwear with Disney’s Hercules. The Disney-based nature of all these images broke down critical distinctions of symbolic types. In the flow of Mighty Ducks, Toy Story and Hercules images, even the most savvy viewer would have had a difficult time distinguishing the programme from the programme separator from the programme promo from the product advertisement.

Conclusion

Media companies are finding themselves in an increasingly costly, competitive, conglomerate-oriented environment, in which economic logic encourages heavy promotion by these companies, often using themselves to do the promotion. Such strategies encourage the production of easily marketable entertainment products, the amount of advertising viewers are exposed to, and the merging of advertising and media content.

Both our ability to evaluate media phenomena and the choices available to us are compromised. As the wall between advertising and content erodes, the aptitude required to understand the functions and design of media content becomes more complex. Techniques such as product placement makes movies and television programmes less ad-free, and may even alter the ideas available in these forms. Advertising itself begins to appropriate the icons and formulae of media content. Indeed, the distinction between what is an ad and what is entertainment may become irrelevant in this new promotional environment.

As far as viewer choice is concerned, certain non-promotional ideas may find fewer and fewer production outlets. Fox, Disney, and Warner Brothers’ creators may introduce content ideas that have less to do with what viewers will find useful and entertaining, and more to do with the promotion of other corporate holdings. Movies and TV episodes that are easy to promote are given preference over other types of content. When the local and network news programmes fill their news time with promotional items, they must inevitably exclude other items which may be less persuasively valuable but more informationally or democratically valuable.

So as media entities toot their own horn, we must wonder what tunes are being left unplayed.

References


Part III

Advertising and Culture