

Textual (Im)Possibilities in the U.S. Post-Network Era: Negotiating Production and Promotion Processes on Lifetime's *Any Day Now*

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This essay explores the struggles experienced in the creation, production, and promotion of a U.S. television series that deliberately sought to encourage cultural reflection about ethnic diversity and defied industrial norms as an original narrative program produced for a cable network. Any Day Now (1998–2002) was the first successful original series produced for the Lifetime Television network and was one of the first successful original cable series. Through an analysis of the production process, interviews with the creators and writers of the series, and examination of the series' promotion, this essay explores how the transition to a post-network era of industrial organization and competitive practice affected the production and promotion of the series and its narratives. These findings are informative both in terms of the specific case and as they might be extrapolated as characteristic of the development of the post-network era.

By the late 1990s, the economy of the U.S. television industry had been significantly reconfigured from the fairly static relations that had characterized it from its 1950s origin to the mid 1980s. A variety of factors—including the success of cable and satellite transmission, the appearance of new broadcast networks, increased ownership conglomeration, decreased regulation, and the emergence of new technologies—combined to usher in a new era of industry competition, forcing adjustments by traditional broadcast networks. During the decade from approximately 1985 to

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1995 these factors substantially altered the institutional environment of the U.S. television industry, a rupture commonly identified as the transition to a post-network or neo-network era.

This study examines the negotiations that producers Nancy Miller and Gary Randall engaged in during the production and promotion of their Lifetime Television series *Any Day Now* (1998–2002), one of the first successful original narrative series produced for a cable network. I explore how the producers' creative goals of expanding social discussion about ethnic difference and racism challenged ideological norms mandated by a commercial media system, and how the changed competitive structure of the post-network era helped make possible textual content that would probably have been too controversial for the network era. The information supporting this article was gathered during observation of the series' production and writing process and through interviews with series' staff held in August of 1999 (also see Newcomb & Lotz, 2002). During the visit, I observed writers' meetings in which many of the second season episodes were planned, attended a "tone" meeting with the director for the episode they were preparing to shoot, and sat in on a promotional strategy meeting as well as daily episode shooting and events such as a photo shoot for *Entertainment Weekly*. I argue that changes in determinations of the audience size and attributes deemed necessary for commercial success have significant consequences on textual possibilities. This case also illuminates the complicated nature of periods of industrial transition in which industry workers face new possibilities while some residual practices, perceptions, and norms continue to constrain their pursuits.

The Post-Network Era and Institutional Analysis

The post-network era refers primarily to changed institutional structure and industrial practice; however, these adjustments cannot be isolated from the industry's creative output: television texts. John Caldwell (1995) documents how these changes in industrial dynamics redefined production and promotion processes and resulted in programming shifts toward "excessive style" and "visual exhibitionism," using the term "televisuality" to describe series' and networks' increased attention to style (pp. 2–5). Caldwell also notes the importance of audience fragmentation in explaining changing stylistic norms, as smaller audiences throughout the television universe increased the value of niche audience groups, potentially enabling more experimentation with visual form and ideological content.

A more traditional concern about the effect of the post-network competitive environment on television texts emerged from political economists who were particularly concerned about increased ownership conglomeration and expanding deregulation. Much of this scholarship argues that concentrated ownership structures lead to the homogenization of culture and decrease the independence of those who produce television content, particularly in the case of journalism (Bagdikian, 1997; Garnham, 1990; McChesney, 1999; Schiller, 1992). In supporting his argument about the massive scope of conglomeration's restrictions on media content,

Bagdikian (1997) cites many examples in which disseminating public information took second place to maintaining business and political relationships among media empires and their commercial backers.

Case study analysis of the post-network era performed by Michael Curtin (1999) maintained, however, that synergies of media conglomeration might increase the diversity and multiplicity of cultural forms because profitability in this environment requires a search for diverse audiences who desire different media products. Curtin (1999) uses three case studies to illustrate that “popular culture remains an active site of social and political contest” despite the conglomerated ownership of the post-network era; he even believes “the media industries may be more open to alternative forms of cultural expression today, simply because executives are not certain from where the next hit will come” (p. 64). Although this era is characterized by few owners with multiple media holdings, great internal competition “toward niche operations that cater to particular tastes” still exists (Curtin, 1996, p. 191).

This case-based work of Caldwell, Bagdikian, and Curtin helps explain how post-network structural changes affect the types of programming created in the US television industry and how the reconfigured competitive environment has altered conventional programming, production, and promotion processes. The discrepancies in their findings suggest a lack of uniformity characteristic of a time of uncertainty and transfiguration. Examinations of individual series’ production processes illustrate the differentiation of post-network industrial practices and indicate the benefits and limitations this competitive environment might offer representations and discourses absent or marginalized during the network era, particularly those that challenge white supremacist, capitalist, or patriarchal norms. This article consequently proceeds from the assumption that focused examinations of individual series, networks, and audience markets provide information and analyses that enable a more precise understanding of new competitive configurations and their consequences for critical media research. Case studies such as the one provided here can be seen as distinct examples, while indicating the possibilities explored by individuals and groups in search of strategies viable in a new economic, regulatory, and sociocultural context.

With some notable exceptions, critical studies of the institutional process of television series production remain relatively rare in comparison with textual analyses, despite the fact that examining the process of production and promotion provides useful information about conventions and practices that create industrial norms (Cantor, 1971; d’Acci, 1994; Gitlin, 1985; Levine, 2001; Newcomb & Alley, 1983; Turow, 1982). Such studies often seek to illustrate the complicated process of ideological production by describing and analyzing the obstacles producers encounter during production and their struggles to negotiate specific goals within the expectations and desires of distribution networks.

The critical frameworks through which researchers develop these studies vary considerably. Todd Gitlin (1985) researched *Inside Prime Time* during the waning years of the network era and examined how the business practices and internal politics of commercial media enterprises constrained textual content. Gitlin’s (1979)

theoretical framework for understanding television remains more traditionally Marxist than the neo-Marxist frameworks emerging from the theories of British cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall and David Morley. The British cultural studies approach, which supports the research of those such as d'Acci (1994), du Gay (1997), Gray (1995), and Levine (2001), addresses the intertwined nature of economic and discursive power by seeking to incorporate analyses of economic and material factors while affording the audience some power in negotiating ideology present in mediated texts.

I use the critical trajectory supported by the British cultural studies approach to production study because of its understanding of cultural production as complicated and varied and its utility in considering the anti-racist and feminist discourses that distinguish my case study. This foundation does not presuppose economic determinism; it views the creation and dissemination of cultural texts as complex and contradictory and as resulting from factors that cannot be reduced to a simple economic base, while still acknowledging the role of economic and business forces (Grossberg, 1995). Additionally, it recognizes the integrated nature of questions about texts, audiences, and social contexts that are informed by analysis of the production process (Johnson, 1986/87; Kellner, 1997). This framework aids this article's dual focus of analyzing the production process as a tool for understanding discursive and ideological features related to telling stories about gender and ethnicity, as well as exploring how the competitive dynamics of the post-network era might enable variation in discursive possibilities.

The series this article examines, *Any Day Now*, aired from August 1998 to March 2002, completing four full seasons and a total of 88 episodes. The series differentiated itself through unconventional feminist and anti-racist discourses and aired on the cable network Lifetime Television, best known for its promotional slogan "Television for Women." A series such as *Any Day Now*, with its focus on the friendship of two female characters who are ethnically different, may illustrate new possibilities for telling stories directed to female audiences; however, the series' efforts to incorporate discourses about ethnicity, class, and other identity-based differences led to conflict with a network that defined its niche more broadly. Although some have suggested that the multiplicity of programming outlets characteristic of the post-network era indicates that a more expansive range of ideological perspectives may now circulate, close examination suggests that multiplicity might yield only slightly more ideological diversity, and then only when the audience niche is considered valuable by advertisers. The case study illustrates how the co-existence of traditional network era practices and new practices that constitute the post-network era lead to a work environment that is difficult for industry workers to negotiate. As industry workers struggle to identify new norms, academic critics must adapt theories and assumptions about the production of culture that acknowledge shifting industry practices. This essay aids in expanding critical understandings of the post-network era by specifying the various kinds of institutional forces operating throughout the pre-production, production, and promotion process of a particular text.

Situating Lifetime's "Television for Women" and *Any Day Now*

Lifetime Television Network emerged as a powerful cable competitor at the close of the 20th century, building on its nearly 20-year history to become the most watched cable network in prime time in 2001 with an average of 1.58 million households (Top 25, 2001). Lifetime began its reign as the most-watched cable network in prime time during the first quarter of 2001, a title it held until faltering in the first quarter of 2003 when it slipped to second amidst a surge by cable news networks covering the path to war in Iraq. Caldwell (1995) and Curtin (1999) substantially explain Lifetime's ascendancy and dominance through their arguments about the importance of niche audiences in post-network era competition. The specific female-focus of Lifetime's programming hails a particular niche interest group—but a comparatively sizable one. Feminist media analyses of Lifetime and its programming strategy have explored the feminine and feminist discourses of the network's programming and promotion and generally found the network to feature themes associated with a traditional femininity (d'Acci, ed., 1994; Meehan & Byars, 2000). Lifetime competes with other basic cable networks (those networks generally available on the cheapest tier of cable service that consequently reach the most homes) such as Turner Network Television (TNT), Turner Broadcasting System (TBS), and USA Network. It reaches 86 million cable and satellite homes, which makes the network nearly universally available to the 84 percent of US homes receiving cable or satellite service (Cable Advertising Bureau, 2003; Top 25, 2002). Lifetime earned the 17th highest revenue among all U.S. television networks in 2002, with \$790 million (Top 25, 2002).

Due to this established institutional position, Lifetime was able to create and sustain original narrative series beginning with the drama *Any Day Now* and sitcoms *Maggie* and *Oh Baby* in 1998. The development of these series mark the network's second attempt at developing original series, with a first attempt as early as 1989 with its continuation of the NBC series *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, then series such as *Confessions of Crime*, *The Hidden Room*, and *Veronica Clare* in 1991. Those series Lifetime originated performed dismally in comparison with the network's original films and were cancelled after airing less than a full season of episodes (Johnson, 1994; Wilson, 1994).

The steady audience gains throughout the cable industry during the 1990s led several of the financially stronger basic cable networks to compete more directly with broadcast networks by creating narrative series similar to, and with budgets approaching the level of, those on broadcast television. Original cable series are able to take content risks because of cable's less stringent regulations and the smaller audience size required to succeed. Producing original series is usually substantially more costly for cable networks than airing the off-air syndicated series that provide plentiful filler for many networks (Petrozzello, 1998). Original narrative series production remains a crucial step in establishing a network brand and expanding the audience base and reputation of a network, but only cable networks in a solid financial position appear able to replicate this competitive strategy. Other basic cable

original narrative series include A&E's *100 Centre Street*, TNT's *Witchblade*, USA's *La Femme Nikita* and *Monk*, and FX's *The Shield*. *Any Day Now* provided a good match for Lifetime because of its emphasis on two female characters, but the series also brought content about racism that had not been as central to the Lifetime brand.

Any Day Now explores the friendship of two women, one white, one black, who were childhood companions in the civil rights hotbed of 1960s Birmingham, Alabama. The narrative of each episode is split between events occurring in the 1990s and those of their 1960s childhood. The series begins as Rene Jackson returns to Birmingham for the funeral of her father James, a man who was instrumental in desegregating Birmingham and spent his life seeking civil rights justice. After growing up in Birmingham, Rene attended the historically black Spelman College and became a corporate lawyer in Washington, D.C. When Rene returns, she and her childhood best friend, Mary Elizabeth O'Brien, have not spoken for over 25 years. Their estrangement results from harsh words exchanged after 18-year-old Mary Elizabeth became pregnant and was angered by Rene's suggestion of abortion as a solution. After Rene returns to Birmingham, the women rekindle their friendship.

Rene takes over her father's law firm and moves back into her childhood home with her mother, Sara. During Rene's absence and immediately after high school, Mary Elizabeth married Colliar Sims, her childhood sweetheart; they now have two teenaged children. Colliar works as a contractor, but initially has trouble maintaining work after a disabling back injury, which makes money tight for the Sims. Despite lifelong dreams of being a writer, Mary Elizabeth's family has occupied nearly all her time. Once her children reach their teens, however, she takes college courses and gradually writes a novel based on her childhood experiences with Rene.

Any Day Now adheres to a conventional U.S. dramatic television format. Stories grounded in the ongoing relationship between the two principle characters and their relationships with friends and family exhibit the seriality common in soap operas (and increasingly common in most television melodrama). These relationship-based problems are never-ending and irresolvable. In contrast to the ongoing nature of relationship stories, the series also usually contains explorations of specific social and political issues within individual episodes. (For example, gay rights are explored in an episode in which Rene represents a lesbian couple wishing to rent a public facility for a commitment ceremony, but this story is introduced and resolved within a single episode). This formal organization often makes the series seem like an issue-oriented program, as the episodic plots tackle distinct topics, such as rape or gay rights. Stories about racism and ethnic difference transcend episodes to become a recurrent and defining theme, but in a trans-episodic structure (rather than the more conventional use of multi-episode plot arcs).

The most unconventional aspect of the series' form is the incorporation of two time periods within each episode. Each 1960s plot with Mary Elizabeth and Rene as girls amplifies the 1990s crisis the characters face. When adult Mary Elizabeth and Colliar experience a lack of intimacy, for example, the 1960s plot shows the events leading to their first kiss. Most importantly, however, the 1960s plots often recall the

overt racism of the era and depict the civil rights struggle. The dual time periods provide an additional layer to the cumulative narrative, so that regular viewers bring knowledge of the extensive role ethnic difference has played in the lives of the characters as they confront obstacles to their friendship in both the 1960s and 1990s.

If *Any Day Now* had debuted 10 years earlier, its content, such as its discourse on issues of ethnicity and racism, quite probably would have been identified as unconventional for a dramatic series. By 1998, however, what was once novel and exceptional content was increasingly common within the competitive dynamics of the post-network era. Series appeared on network schedules that presented stories about two women in a dramatic series (*Cagney & Lacey*, CBS, 1982–1988) or explored stories about racism set in both the present (*In the Heat of the Night*, NBC/CBS, 1988–1994) and the past (*I'll Fly Away*, NBC, 1991–1993; *Homefront*, ABC, 1991–1993). Consequently, *Any Day Now's* attention to past and present racism and its emphasis on dramatic stories about two female characters were neither wholly innovative nor unique. The narrative exploration of these areas, however, remained uncommon on U.S. television. There is not space to address the critical scholarship exploring black representations on U.S. television or the institutional factors important in their development, but this article is informed by this work (Gray, 1995; Hall, 1986, 1992; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Means Coleman, 1998; Zook, 1999).

Any Day Now provides a useful case study for clarifying the industrial and cultural significance of post-network era programming strategies because it offers uncommon depictions and discourses related to gender and ethnicity and because of its status as an early cable foray into original series production. Executive producers Miller and Randall sought to make a deliberate creative intervention with this series, which they expressed as a desire for *Any Day Now* to instigate “water-cooler conversation” about racial politics in America (N. Miller, personal communication, August 19, 1999). This explicit desire to achieve a goal broader than economic gain and the producers’ efforts toward intervening in cultural debates reveal a great deal about the challenges producers face in telling stories with non-dominant ideological emphases. I acknowledge that this may overstate the nobility of Miller and Randall’s goals for the series, but my visit with them and their actions in regard to the series support their assertion. For example, they lobbied Lifetime to conduct a televised “Town Hall Meeting on Race in America” following a particularly political episode, and they also participated in fora held at universities that used the narrative content to spur discussion of racism in America. In my interview, Miller expressed that she had earned enough money writing stories about rape victims and other unempowered women to be in a personal financial position to remain committed to her narrative vision regardless of the economic consequences.

Unlike the series *Cagney & Lacey*, which set precedent with its dramatic narrative emphasis on two female characters and their relationship (d’Acci, 1994), Miller and Randall had little difficulty compelling Lifetime to permit a focus on the personal struggles of Rene and Mary Elizabeth and their relationship. As the following analysis explores, topics and themes related to racism were much more problematic

to Lifetime's programming department. Content struggles related to the series' emphasis on exploring ethnic difference may be expected; nevertheless, considering the sites at which they emerge is valuable for understanding the complexity of textual production and ideological transmission.

Creating, Producing, and Promoting Television For Women: The Struggle of a Lifetime

Simply bringing *Any Day Now* to television was an unusually formidable challenge, and the difficulties faced by its creators indicate the potential innovations and limitations of post-network programming. Miller and co-creator Deborah Joy Levine sold their original concept for the show to CBS in 1990 (Nancy Miller & Gary Randall, 1999). This version was a comedy/drama blend about the interracial friendship of two girls growing up in 1960s Birmingham. Orion, headed by Gary Randall, was to produce the series. Randall pulled the show days before it was to begin production because he believed the time was not right for a series about children. Miller then spent eight years trying to find an outlet for the series and became partners with Randall shortly before Lifetime contacted her. Two of the executives who were at CBS when the network ordered *Any Day Now* had moved to Lifetime and remembered Miller's script. Lifetime was preparing to launch its first drama and wanted Miller's project if she could add a contemporary dimension to the show by also depicting the girls as adults. Miller and Randall reconfigured the series to meet Lifetime's request.

Although there may be few "conventional" stories of series creation, Miller's persistence and the conditions under which Lifetime ultimately purchased the series extend beyond the usual circumstances. The seven-year memory of the CBS/Lifetime programming executives illustrates the insularity of the executive community, as well as the potential value of such insularity for ideas presented "before their time." The jump from the generally-oriented CBS network of the early 1990s and a dramedy about two girls to the niche-focused Lifetime and its desire for a more dramatic emphasis and adult focus exemplifies how particular network brands with specific programming emphases emerge as a result of the differentiation mandated by the post-network competitive environment.

Despite Lifetime's offer, Miller and Randall had difficulty finding a studio that would produce the series. In the typical arrangement, Miller and Randall would partner with a production studio that would finance the series beyond the per-episode license fee paid by Lifetime and then retain ownership of the series for later syndication sales to recoup the investment. Concerns about the rate of return on a series that was produced for a first-run on a cable network, probably in concert with the series' unconventional content, made finding a studio uncommonly difficult for a series already granted a pilot commitment.

The struggle Miller and Randall experienced at this stage in the production process is illustrative of larger issues relating to post-network programming strategies. To set the broadest institutional context, a variety of factors created concern

about the series' viability for syndication. First, a standout original series success had not yet been produced by any of the basic cable networks. Lifetime's endeavor with *Any Day Now* (the creation of a quality original drama series with a budget approaching that of a broadcast network series) was uncharted territory for the U.S. television industry in 1998. (USA had just begun *La Femme Nikita* at this point, but this was a shared venture with Canadian, British, and Italian companies that ensured multinational distribution). The second-run viability of a series originally viewed by only three million households on a cable network was largely unknown. *Any Day Now's* broadcast-like budget and production values comprised part of its innovation, while also contributing to its risk. It was possible that viewers in second-run markets would not recognize the series as exceptional from other syndicated dramas, increasing its second-run value, but the lack of a prior case made investors uncertain.

Second, in 1998, the rankings of basic cable networks had not yet shifted to validate the strategy of networks with clear and distinctive network brands (sometimes called "boutiques"), as opposed to general interest networks such as TNT, USA, TBS, FX, and TNN (Higgins, 2001). Because the conventional thinking of the cable industry validated the general interest cable networks, Lifetime's attempt to create original programming seemed an exceptional gamble. Lifetime's success with *Any Day Now* and its other original series is arguably a crucial factor in the network's rise to basic cable prominence by 2001.

Finally, Miller was also looking for a studio at a time during which the effects of eliminating the financial interest and syndication rules were beginning to emerge throughout the industry. Networks increasingly purchased series produced by their own studios during the late 1990s, and Lifetime's lack of a narrative production studio provided challenges for Miller which would have been less likely had a network with a co-owned production studio purchased the series.

Unquestionably, *Any Day Now's* distribution on a cable network provides the key defining institutional aspect of this series and contributes to the problem of risk outlined here. Lifetime's network history, brand identification, and audience penetration each contribute to the construction of *Any Day Now's* form and audience. Airing on a cable network dramatically alters the audience size required for success. At the time, a top-rated cable series often drew only five to eight million households and could rank in the top 25 shows viewed on cable per week with as few as two million households. In comparison, top broadcast shows in 1998–1999 drew about 17 million households, with the top 25 reaching at least nine million. In its first season, *Any Day Now* averaged 1.6 million households, increasing to just over two million in season two and peaking at 3.1 million for its two-hour movie in October 1999. The smaller audiences required on cable allow for the success of unconventional programming, while the degree to which cable networks struggle to get audiences to sample their programming still provides substantial risk for investors. Consequently, demographic and economic factors must also be understood as the cultural factors that underlie fundamental aspects of television texts. The business of television cannot be separated from the artistic content in a commercial system, which allows considerations that would normally seem purely economic to play a

considerable role in the creation and dissemination of cultural texts. These intersections are at the center of any attempt to understand the textual variance enabled by post-network industrial configurations.

Any Day Now's planned emphasis on the ethnic differences of its lead characters also contributed to the assessment of risk. Randall acknowledged that there was a perception that stories about U.S. racism would not sell well internationally (G. Randall, personal communication, August 19, 1999). Perception, founded in empirical research or not, is a crucial and arbitrary aspect of cultural production that affirms convention and encourages the reworking of known forms and themes. Obvious parallels to the history of U.S. racism—conflict among Israelis and Palestinians, Pakistanis and Indians, conflict structured by religion, class, caste—suggest the broad applicability of the series' stories, despite industry beliefs of their U.S. specificity. The perception that *Any Day Now* would not sell well internationally is similar to perceptions networks often acknowledge about the limits of content that audiences will find acceptable: perceptions that tend to err on the side of caution and convention. Havens (2000, 2002) has not found ethnicity to be a problem in the international syndication of situation comedies featuring black casts such as *The Cosby Show*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and *Family Matters*, but did find some international buyers to be hesitant of purchasing comedies with more of an emphasis on the black American experience, particularly those featuring slang and African American speech patterns, such as *Martin* and *The Jamie Foxx Show*. Importantly, and as Havens (2002) emphasizes, the reality of whether international audiences would embrace stories about U.S. racial politics is unimportant because distributor perceptions often lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those shows perceived to have little appeal do not receive the promotion required to succeed, or even may not be purchased or produced, as was nearly the case for *Any Day Now*.

Lifetime acted as both production studio and network for the pilot episode in order to advance production while Miller and Randall sought a studio. A network and an external production company would usually split these roles, and assuming both functions created a tense relationship between Miller and Randall and the Lifetime executives. The network needed to take full responsibility for both the quality of the content (production studio emphasis) and the budget (network emphasis), a difficult balance in the pilot phase since quality is often improved by increasing expenditures. A production company might put more financial resources into a concept (pilot) they suspect will be profitable in the long run in order to get past the barrier of an initial purchase of episodes, while the network is more interested in limiting its financial expenditures on a product to which it is not yet committed. The initial tension in the relationship between Miller and Randall and the network may have contributed to struggles over content and promotion that developed later.

Miller and Randall eventually reached an agreement with Spelling Entertainment to produce the series. Randall attributes the eventual success of the deal to the fact that Spelling, Miller, and he all employed agents from the same firm, and that the agents' perseverance in constructing the deal resulted from their common stake (G.

Randall, personal communication, August 19, 1999). The challenges the series faced in this typically uncontested stage of production indicate the complexity of negotiating conventions during a time of industrial change. Further, the fact that a resolution came through the chance of mutual representation illustrates the complicated distribution of power among various roles in the creation of cultural productions (Turow, 1997).

Production Struggles: Negotiating Content

Even after finding a distribution outlet at Lifetime and a studio willing to take a risk on a product attempting an unconventional endeavor, the producers of *Any Day Now* were still only at the beginning of a complicated process. Examining the negotiations surrounding what producers Miller and Randall intended for the series and what Lifetime executives desired for their schedule reveals how the complex process of program creation continues in the post-network era. The sites of contention between the network and producers expose some of the limitations in representing non-dominant themes and identity groups, limitations that remain intact despite expansion in niche audience possibilities. Two sites emerge as points of contention: first, the amount of creative autonomy Lifetime afforded the producers, and second, the network's positioning of the series through scheduling, marketing, and in relation to the Lifetime brand. Content that narrowed the potential audience (too focused on ethnicity issues, addressing women of certain age groups) and the series' tone ("nice" women's stories versus "exploitation" themes) proved particularly contentious in the struggle over creative autonomy.

Miller followed conventional practice and received approval for plot ideas from Lifetime both when the ideas existed as "broad stroke" episode outlines and through their development into scripts, which allowed the network some influence in the content and form of the series. Despite the requirements of this constant approval, *Any Day Now's* writers were generally happy with the relationship with Lifetime and the content it allowed. Lifetime permitted the series to use the racist epithet "nigger" in order to express accurately the speech of southern whites in the 1960s and approved other references generally unacceptable in public speech in an effort to maintain the verisimilitude of often awkward discussions of ethnicity and racism. This laxity in content restriction is particularly important to the series' explicit exploration of the often unspoken significance of ethnicity in contemporary U.S. society and in retelling painful stories of racism in America's past.

Miller and Randall, however, were frustrated that their stories were shared with such a small audience because of their broader creative goal for the series to provoke cultural discussion of racial politics. They acknowledged that smaller audiences were a consequence of the increased creative freedom made available on a cable network, and Miller affirmed Lifetime as her preferred outlet if given the choice of airing on Lifetime or having the broader audience exposure that would come only with more stringent creative limitations common on broadcast networks. The post-network era may make niche audiences commercially viable, but creators seeking to tell stories

with unconventional content are also faced with a Hobson's choice of small audiences or none at all. This is an improvement from the network era in which there were no options available for stories such as Miller's, but it must be understood as a measured gain.

Conflicts about content developed despite the series' positioning on Lifetime, and primarily resulted from Lifetime's determination of which audiences are most demographically valuable and the network's sense that Miller's stories did not appeal enough to this group. For example, one of the writers proposed a plot about aging, which Miller quickly rejected based on her awareness of the audience age group Lifetime desired. "Keep it young and contemporary" appears as one of four sets of "words of wisdom" hanging on the wall in Miller's office as a reminder to the writers. At this time the lead characters would have been 46 in a realistic account of the narrative, but Lifetime did not want to emphasize that the characters were approaching 50 or even offer plots that would acknowledge they were in their forties. Lifetime sells its time to advertisers based on its number of female audience members between the ages of 18 and 49, although audiences in the 18-to-34-year-old age range attract even more advertising dollars. Lifetime consequently seeks stories perceived to resonate with women in their mid thirties or below, rather than those approaching 50. By the end of *Any Day Now's* second season, it drew equivalent ratings in the categories women 18-to-49 and women 50-plus (1.7 each). The series earned a 1.9 rating in women 25-to-54 and a 1.3 rating in women 18-to-34.

Again, perception plays an important role in the suggestions and mandates the network provided to the creators. To increase numbers of younger viewers, *Any Day Now* focused more on Mary Elizabeth's teenage daughter Kelly in the final seasons of the series, as she became pregnant and married before graduating from high school. The show maintained its emphasis on racial politics by having Kelly marry a black man, but the increased narrative time afforded to Kelly decreased the time spent on stories about Mary Elizabeth, Rene, and their relationship. Despite opening space for dramatic stories about two female characters and their ethnic difference, Lifetime remained bound by advertisers' preference for younger audiences. This is not to say that younger women are unconcerned with stories about issues such as aging, but that the network placed particular value on signifiers such as a central teen character that they perceived would lead more young viewers to the series.

A more contentious area of content negotiation between Miller and Lifetime evolved from the series' emphasis on racial politics. Throughout the series' four-year run, Miller and her staff wrote stories about racism that were aggressively confrontational and challenged audiences with contemporary topics including interracial dating and marriage, the color caste system, affirmative action, stereotypes, racial epithets, "passing," and racial profiling, in addition to giving dramatic depth to historical stories such as the march on Washington, the 16th St. Baptist church bombing, Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, KKK terrorism, civil rights activism and organizing in the Jackson home, as well as everyday racism and segregation. A note from Lifetime midway through the writing of the second season suggested that

the series' past plots focused too heavily on civil rights stories, which led Miller to de-emphasize these stories. The network was not wholly averse to civil rights stories; rather, they sought more diversity in the events represented from the 1960s (the series instead placed more emphasis on aspects of 1960s popular culture). The shift away from regularly including stories about America's racist history was noticeable and prevented the series from continuing what had been a distinguishing narrative feature from its first season. "Past" plots commenting on racism or race-related topics dropped from 56 percent of shows before the Lifetime note to 17 percent of shows following (through the end of the second season).

Lifetime probably believed that Miller's anti-racist discourse could diminish the size of the audience by alienating those for whom Miller's agenda was too aggressive. Thus Miller had to negotiate her desire to tell provocative stories about racism with Lifetime's desire to not alienate potential audience members who might be estranged by the show's uncompromising anti-racist position. My point here is to acknowledge that even though Lifetime allowed a more expansive presentation of stories with explicit anti-racist themes, Miller and her staff were not given *carte blanche*. The request for fewer civil rights-focused past plots was announced during my visit. I do not have direct knowledge of other similar requests, but it is certainly reasonable that receiving this note from the network shaped the stories the staff proposed and their perception of what the network would accept, as illustrated by self-censorship regarding the aging example.

Another suggestion from Lifetime addressed the tone of the series. One writer noted that comments from Lifetime often included suggestions to heighten the amount of drama, perhaps best understood as melodramatic conflict (M. Israel, personal communication, August 18, 1999). This request is especially significant when considered in relation to the made-for-Lifetime films earning the network some infamy for constructing stories that characterize women as victims (*A Dangerous Affair*, 1995; *A Kiss So Deadly*, 1996; *A Loss of Innocence*, 1996). These films provide the strongest ratings performance for the network, but they have also garnered criticism for their emphasis on women who are victims or in peril, who are confronted with agonizing decisions in their personal lives, but who succeed and defeat their victimizer in the end (Byars & Meehan, 1994; Hundley, 1999; McAdams, 1999; Meehan & Byars, 2000).

The perception that excessive melodrama and exploitation themes attract female audiences has often led female-focused series to heighten these elements. D'Acci (1994) chronicles the struggles the writers of *Cagney & Lacey* experienced when the network realized exploitation plots—sensational content often incorporating sex and violence—performed well. The success of exploitation plots in increasing audience size led CBS to push for more of these plots, while these were not always the stories the writers primarily wished to tell. In their discussion of story ideas, the *Any Day Now* writers expressed recognition of the difference between exploitation plots and what one writer termed the series' status as a "nice chick show"; a distinction acknowledging the series' emphasis on interpersonal and familial crises rather than more extreme cases of violence and threats to the family's continued existence.

Balancing elements of exploitation and being a nice women's show was a constant negotiation.

An example of a script change that may have resulted from efforts to heighten drama occurred in the rewriting process of an episode originally about an atheist teacher who is suspended when parents fear she is sharing her beliefs with students. The writers composed the broad strokes for this script and pitched the idea to Miller during my visit. Over the next few days Miller and the writers discussed where they personally, as parents, would want to draw the line in terms of other aspects of a teacher's identity they would find unacceptable. The writers asked Miller, who does not have children, if she would have any trouble with an atheist as a teacher. She responded, "Probably not if it [atheism] didn't come into anything." When asked if she would have trouble with a Wiccan—someone participating in the Wicca religion, which is often connected to witchcraft—she answered, "Yes, I'd get my kid out of school if a witch was teaching them" (N. Miller, personal communication, August 19, 1999). Miller later asked Randall the two questions, receiving two "no" answers. She then asked him, "What if the teacher were a Nazi?"—to which he said he would take them out of school. When the episode aired, the teacher was a Wiccan rather than an atheist, and was fired, although the series presented the grounds for her appeal as promising.

Based on conversations in which the creative team expressed a sense that a Wiccan was more dangerous or controversial than an atheist, this transition from original plot to the episode that aired (a process I was not present for) might be understood as a decision to increase the sensational aspects of the story. The series also included more typically exploitative plots, including a stalker's harassing of Rene (season one) and Mary Elizabeth's encounter with a burglar at work and consequent post-traumatic stress (season two). Lifetime's request for the series to heighten its drama resulted from its perception of which stories are valued by female audiences and illustrates another way Miller's vision was subordinated to network mandates, despite the other opportunities resulting from airing on a niche network.

Promotion Struggles: "We Are So Much More than Bubble Baths and Tea Cups"

In addition to struggles over storylines, the conflict between Lifetime's aims for the show, the producers' creative vision, and the precarious position of niche targeted series can be seen in the strategies Lifetime used to promote *Any Day Now*. The series' promotion can be viewed as conventional in many ways, but a range of factors contributed to a struggle between the series' producers and Lifetime's promotion department over promotional definition and strategy. Miller and Randall's concern resulted from how promotion contributed to the size and type of the audience, but also to what viewers expected from the series. Miller and Randall's intentions for the series as the basis of water-cooler conversations led them to criticize Lifetime's promotional campaign. In Miller's words: "We wasted our first year, as far as getting the show out there because we trusted them [Lifetime] to do it" (N. Miller, personal communication, August 19, 1999). Their sense of a wasted effort resulted both from

Lifetime's limited promotion of the series outside the network and the type of promotional strategy used.

Miller argued that Lifetime's promotions depicted the series as all "tea cups and bubble baths"; a comment on Lifetime's heavy use of promotional teases depicting the women's conversations and of images connected with the "soft" content of a series about friendship. These promotions constructed the series as about the life-long friendship of two women instead of bringing to the fore the often controversial issues that threatened their friendship in each episode. A print advertisement in *Entertainment Weekly* from the first season exhibits this strategy. On a full-page split graphically in half—black on the top, pink on the bottom—the following promotion appears:

It's hot, it's cold, it's funny, it's tragic, it's forever, it's whatever. Must be a friendship between two women.

The advertisement does not mention the stars, the genre, or the defining aspect of a story set in two time periods that examines not only a friendship, but also an interracial friendship between two women in the U.S. south. Randall argued that "every [cable] network that has succeeded in promoting their programming and getting ratings numbers has succeeded in promoting either the provocative or the salacious aspects of that show," citing *South Park* and *The Sopranos* as examples.

As second season episodes began airing, Miller mandated that her writing staff "give Lifetime no choice," meaning that her staff should offer them nothing soft to promote. Throughout the second season, some promotion reflected Miller's pleading with the network. Specifically, Lifetime promoted the two-part episode "It's Not About the Butter" with emphasis on the political content of the episode. Lifetime aired this episode as a special event, presenting it as a two-hour movie in the time slot usually featuring made-for-Lifetime films and followed it with a "Town Hall Discussion of Race in America." The advertisement for the episode superimposes written sentences—"You will be shocked. You will be angry. You will think twice."—over some of the most emotionally charged scenes of the episode. After clips from the episode's dialogue, the narrator announces, "Lifetime presents an explosive two-hour *Any Day Now*. Two hours you'll never forget." The promotion closes with a line of Rene's dialogue, "Sometimes what's at stake is more important than being safe," which is followed by Mary Elizabeth gasping, "My god," when she sees a cross burning in her front yard.

This style of promotion is more in line with what Miller and Randall sought and was replicated to a lesser extent in subsequent promotions. Instead of images of Rene and Mary Elizabeth talking to each other on the phone or over a cup of coffee, a common first season image, these later promotions focused more on the issue of the episode. For example, one promotion depicts Mary Elizabeth finding a condom falling out of her daughter's boyfriend's jacket and then shows Bill arriving at Rene's house—months after calling off their wedding—where she is entertaining her new, white boyfriend. Such promotions reveal the week's controversy to viewers without exposing its resolution. Notably, emphasizing controversy is in accord with Life-

time's strategy for promoting its films; these promotions feature the exploitative elements of the situation, the "woman in danger" motif of the films. In many ways, this is the type of promotion Miller desired.

Particular frustration with Lifetime's efforts in promoting the anti-racist discourse of the series led Miller and Randall to pursue what they termed a grassroots campaign to help audiences seeking casts with ethnic diversity to find the series. (They went so far as to hire a public relations consultant, in addition to the one hired by Lifetime.) This struggle over how to promote the show occurred during the summer of 1999, at the same time the NAACP and other organizations representing non-dominant ethnic groups received extensive press coverage of their protests over the lack of diversity in ethnic representations in the programs the broadcast networks were preparing to launch. In many ways it was a veritable promotional bonanza waiting to happen, but Miller could not draw attention to the series because the advocacy groups focused only on broadcast networks. Consequently, *Any Day Now*, a show exemplifying the advocacy groups' calls for diversity in front of and behind the camera went unmentioned in their highly publicized assault on the "television industry" as defined by network era standards.

When the publicists pushed Miller and Randall to describe the "call to action" they sought, the curious circumstances of the campaign emerged. Miller and Randall sought for the publicists to mobilize members of groups such as the National Council of Negro Women to write letters both to Lifetime in praise of the show (so that they might continue their emphasis on racism and ethnic difference) and to major press outlets to draw attention to the show. This was an unusual request of audience members, who typically only mobilize in letter writing campaigns when a network threatens cancellation of a show. There was, however, no apparent threat; according to Miller, Lifetime was very happy with the ratings the series received and she did not believe the show would face danger of cancellation unless its audience dropped below half a million households (once established, the series consistently drew two million) (N. Miller, personal communication, August 19, 1999). The publicists were uncertain of how to proceed without a cancellation threat, based on their perception of how viewers practice and understand their role. Extending *Any Day Now's* viewership in an effort to advance cultural discussions about racism was certainly a worthwhile enterprise, but viewers and public relations executives have an understanding of the transaction involved in being audiences and creating audiences. How to circumvent traditional practices for an uncommon series with a goal beyond commercial success, however, remains unclear.

Promotion is particularly crucial in the post-network era because so many networks now compete for the attention of audiences. Lifetime's lack of promotion of the series outside the network was particularly limiting, as non-Lifetime viewers had little awareness of the series. Additionally, the series' deviation from conventional "Television for Women" themes could have attracted a broader audience or at least other specific audience segments. Even once the network moved to issue-oriented promotion, the racial politics were not nearly as central in promotion as they were in the episodes, and the network continued to offer no indication of the

past plots in promotion. These promotion practices also suggest a concern about how the series' anti-racist politics and attention to issues of ethnic difference might be received. By not emphasizing Miller's anti-racist agenda in promotion, Lifetime forfeited audiences for whom these themes would have particular appeal.

Ron Becker (1998) uses the term "slumpies" (socially liberal, urban-minded professionals) to describe the audience psychographic that many advertisers sought in the 1990s (psychographic measures incorporate lifestyle components and values as another way to categorize audiences). Becker focuses on the slumpies' importance to the expansion of gay friendly programming, but slumpies could also be reached with anti-racist and feminist programming such as *Any Day Now*. In constructing its promotion of *Any Day Now*, Lifetime apparently calculated that downplaying the series' unconventional anti-racist discourse to appeal to those accustomed to the less politically progressive Lifetime brand would provide a larger audience than emphasizing the slumple-friendly themes (anti-racist and feminist discourse) that may have drawn new or infrequent viewers to the network. This is contrary to the way a network such as Showtime promotes their series *Queer as Folk*, perhaps a quintessential example of post-network programming. This show clearly defines its "edge" and effectively disinvites those intolerant of gay identities. *Any Day Now's* status as a preliminary original cable series may explain Lifetime's use of a more conventional—arguably network era—strategy, further illustrating the complexity of industrial practices during a period of transition.

Conclusion

Examining the creative process involved in the creation, production, and promotion of *Any Day Now* contributes a range of information valuable for critical media inquiry. The adjustments of the post-network era have altered the boundaries of textual possibility within which the industry functioned for many years. Some practices have changed radically (channel expansion and competition, audience sizes needed for viability), while other practices remain intact (program funding by studios who seek sizable profits in secondary markets, ways of promoting programming to women, networks exerting creative control over series' creative staff). Not all of these practices are in flux, and the process of transition varies by network, series, and over time. Still, to truly understand the textual ramifications of institutional adjustments, one needs to attend to the shifting institutional and economic practices throughout the pre-production, production and promotion process. Bagdikian (1997), Curtin (1996, 1999), and Caldwell (1995) arrive at their assessments of the post-network era by focusing on only a handful of institutional rearrangements, rather than the entire process. Although this study only considers a singular case, it is more holistic in understanding the myriad forces that impinge upon the final textual strategies of the series, including issues of channel identity, audience size, competitive environment, program funding practices, and promotional efforts in relation to texts, producers, and networks.

Within the context of a holistic approach to a singular case, this study illuminates

two sets of information. First, the specifics of this case support the truism of commercial cultural production that an audience niche must achieve a size deemed “substantial” and possess attributes valued by advertisers in order to be served. On its face, this statement provides little innovation; however, as a case occurring during the post-network era, the struggles and success of *Any Day Now* illustrate adjustments in which audiences are now perceived as “substantial.” Secondly, periods of industrial change can enable unconventional products; yet the uncertainty of new rules can also make variance from convention difficult during the process of transition. Media industry pundits have often noted that no one in Hollywood wants to be first, but that everyone is lining up to be second. It is this fear of failing when trying something new, paired with the desire to be among the first when a new trend emerges, that accounts for the industry’s reliance on tested concepts and formats, which are reinvigorated through endless recombination and subtle variation.

The Commercial Viability of Smaller Audience Niches Enables Unconventional Programming.

Many established norms and processes shifted from the time of Miller’s first pitch of the series in 1990 to the time she ultimately secured the Lifetime contract. The emergence of Lifetime as a niche network able to support original narrative programming is an important development for those who study how changing industrial relations constrain and enable shifts in programming. Lifetime selected Miller’s series because of the congruence of its story with the network’s focus, and Miller consequently experienced little of the network interference endured by the creative team of *Cagney & Lacey*. The case of *Any Day Now* on Lifetime, however, also makes clear that producers still face many limitations in telling stories and reaching audiences. The anti-racist message of the series became a primary point of contention between the creators and the network precisely because *Any Day Now* aired on Lifetime. The central role of Mary Elizabeth and Rene’s relationship might have developed as an issue of contention if a network that did not primarily define itself as “Television for Women” distributed the series. Ironically, many of the series’ struggles in both negotiating content with Lifetime and finding an appropriate promotion strategy illustrate how a series that defines itself (or is defined) differently from an audience niche perceived to be profitable faces challenges similar to those of more broadly defined series in the network era. If *Any Day Now* had aired on “The Network for Anti-Racist Women of All Ages,” its content might have been considered conventional enough to avoid some of the conflicts it experienced on Lifetime, but the market has yet to indicate that such a precise niche might be profitable.

Lifetime had not explicitly connected its brand identity to anti-racist ideologies and the exploration of ethnic diversity until *Any Day Now*, although its self-promotion often emphasizes multicultural depictions of women in a manner that could be described as providing “window-dressing.” Admittedly, Lifetime has a better record of including ethnically diverse casts than dramatic series about women

airing on broadcast networks that overwhelmingly feature white, straight, upper-middle class, single, career women. Still, Lifetime's contribution should be considered as only a measured gain. The dramas Lifetime has developed since *Any Day Now* (*Strong Medicine*, 2000–; *The Division*, 2001–; *For the People*, 2002–2003) illustrate the network's apparently preferred strategy of including characters with diverse ethnicities without regularly emphasizing the discrepant privilege afforded as a result—an emphasis *Any Day Now* maintained.

The success of the Lifetime venture in providing series for women should be noted, but not overstated, as little evidence of similar success for other under-represented and non-dominant identity groups exists. Despite some recognition of the slumple preference for narratives with themes about social justice, no network has built a brand identity around this psychographic sensibility. The recent multiplication of cable networks targeting women and the expansion of dramatic series centering female characters across all networks results from conventional perceptions about household buying patterns and women's status as a sizable demographic group (Byars & Meehan, 1994). At half the population, women are hardly a niche, although programming targeted toward them continues to be perceived in that way. Successive cable original narrative series have emerged from generally targeted networks such as A&E, TNT, FX, and USA and have not contested the white patriarchal norms of broadcast schedules. Only pay cable network Showtime has attempted and succeeded with original dramas challenging the white norms of U.S. television (*Soul Food*, *Resurrection Blvd.*), but these shows are only available to those willing and able to pay a monthly premium.

Periods of Industrial Change Enable Textual Innovation, but Residual Norms Deter and Simultaneously Counteract New Possibilities

This case provides particularly valuable information about how the emergence of *Any Day Now* during a period of institutional transition affected the negotiation of dominant ideological and industrial practices. Moreover, it indicates which possibilities the new institutional environment might enable for deviation from ideological norms. As noted in multiple locations, perceptions, regardless of their validity, provide some of the most substantial barriers to unconventional types of shows (original narrative cable series) and unconventional content (stories about racism). For *Any Day Now*, perceptions that only US audiences—and certain segments at that—would be interested in stories about the history and present reality of US racism nearly prevented production, while the perception that the series must expand the role of its teen characters to increase the number of younger viewers led to adjustments in narrative emphases.

Although many of the conditions that challenged *Any Day Now*'s production team resulted from factors that seem economic in nature, such as syndication, demographics, budgets, audience size, and audience markets, it is important to recognize these factors as inseparable from the cultural contribution of narratives. Neither the texts nor the industrial context explain the situation in full, but a comprehensive

picture emerges from examining their intersections. A study of another series would vary in specific details, but studies of what occurs in writers' rooms, director's meetings, promotional strategy sessions, and conversations with networks reveal the interconnections within the process of the creation and dissemination of cultural texts. Some scholars might use the compromises Miller made in her narrative as evidence of the impossibility for texts to challenge ideological norms. Instead, I see the case of *Any Day Now* as an indication of the complex struggle and process of negotiation in which a dominant ideological structure clearly exerts itself, but also proves to be permeable. Miller may have compromised the idealized version of her story in a variety of ways, but she was still able to produce and disseminate a series that challenged racist institutions in a consistent and repeated manner. It may be that the success of programs that defy conventions will alter perceptions about viable content and forms (as *The Cosby Show* once did) but, as this case shows, this is a long and slow process of negotiation.

Many features of industrial practice have changed in response to the post-network competitive environment, while much also remains the same. Many of the most difficult struggles Miller and Randall faced resulted from others (Lifetime, production studios, NAACP) adhering to the conventional logic of the network era, despite its obsolescence. The emerging nature of the post-network era makes it an invaluable site of study for determining larger patterns, perhaps before they become historical rather than contemporary practices. The post-network era is still very much defined by uncertainty for both its practitioners and academic researchers. As producers such as Miller and Randall struggle to determine the new rules and possibilities available to them, so must we engage the emerging debates, dilemmas, and practices that lend insight into the processes of cultural creation that are both enabled and constrained by this developing competitive environment.

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