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The Promotional Role of the Network Upfront Presentations in the Production of Culture



Amanda D. Lotz
University of Michigan

This article explores the Upfront presentations made by United States broadcasters to the media-buying community each year to analyze the complicated economic and cultural functions of promotional processes that occur before programs ever reach the viewing audience. The analysis draws from observation of Upfront presentations, triangulated with analysis of trade press articles and interviews, to present a comprehensive examination of this component of promotion within the circuit of cultural production. Examining the promotional activities that occur before programming reaches audiences illustrates the dual client nature of the United States commercial television industry, and the different strategies evinced indicate the need to theorize internal promotion distinctly from the promotion of texts and networks to audiences. Additionally, the variant promotional strategies used by different networks in this internal venue reveal institutional priorities in audience composition and brand differentiation among networks.

Keywords: *U.S. television; Upfront presentations; promotion; networks; industrial practice*

The late 1940s origin of United States television proved most serendipitous for the process of establishing postwar consumer culture, and the distribution of television greatly contributed to the expanding economy of mass-produced goods characteristic of capitalism during the latter decades of Fordist industrialism. United States commercial television has been viewed by many as a crucial advocate of the consumerism and over-consumption necessary for maximizing the logic of industrial economies.

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Because of its broad reach and quickly established ubiquity, television became central to the “promotional culture” (Wernick 1991) or “consumer society” (Baudrillard 1988) identified as characteristic of late capitalism (Nixon 1997).

Television and promotion can be studied in a number of ways. Most commonly, researchers have attended to the advertisements television transmits and the clear proconsumption ideology within its content. However, the complicated process of exchange and sale at work in commercial television yields a broader range of promotional sites than traditionally examined. The primary commodity of a commercial television system is not the programming but the production and sale of audiences. Although critical media theorists have developed sophisticated theories about promotional culture and analysis of advertising strategies, this work nearly exclusively focuses on the sale of products and programs to audiences and has rarely attended to the promotional practices that precede the viewing audience.

Networks and production companies promote their shows at a variety of other locations. Sites including the broadcast Upfront presentations, syndication fairs such as the Los Angeles screenings and the National Association of Television Program Executives (NATPE) convention, and even network presentations to critics at the biannual Television Critics Association tour provide promotional opportunities that are internal to the processes of cultural production. These events precede the introduction of programming to audiences, which does not afford them greater value or importance—but makes them fundamentally different. Internal promotion requires specific strategies, provides a site for the assertion of power between industrial entities, and is integral to production processes. As Wernick (1991) describes, promotion is not an “external complement to the primary activity of production,” but rather, promotion is integrated and considered from the moment an idea is conceived (p. 15). Promotion begins when a writer pitches an idea to a network, continues through the pilot selection process, and remains central through the presentation of new shows to advertisers. Additionally, events such as the syndication fairs in which producers promote their programs to station groups and international buyers and networks, continue the promotion process in the syndication market—promotional venues that also operate independently from promotion targeted to viewers. Although less examined, such internal promotional events are crucial locations for identifying and analyzing broader norms and assumptions on which commercial media industries operate.

This article examines the broadcast networks’ Upfront presentations and what they reveal about industry priorities, practices, and strategies of internal promotion. The promotional strategies used in Upfront

presentations differ significantly from those used in the promotion of programming to viewers, so that the strategies and conventions of a venue such as the Upfront presentations make apparent the commodity status of the audience and the distinction of internal promotion strategies. Additionally, critically reading the presentations provides valuable information about how networks assert their strengths relative to perceived advertiser valuations and enfranchise certain audience groups while disenfranchising others. The presentations occur during the course of a week each May in midtown Manhattan, and their primary task is to announce each network's programming schedule for the fall season, including what new shows each will premiere. Advertisers and the media buyers and planners who serve as conduits between the networks and advertisers in negotiating the sale of advertising time primarily compose the audience for the presentations. Additionally, the networks invite a few members of the press, producers of their series, representatives from their affiliate stations, and others who work for the networks.

The Upfront presentations serve important promotional functions in a variety of superficial and substantial ways. On the surface, their primary function appears to be that of disseminating information about a network's new season of programming; however, much of the information about program selection and scheduling increasingly circulates in the trade press in the weeks before the events or is relayed to media buyers in meetings earlier in the year, decreasing the importance of this function. The elimination of the Upfront presentations would likely have little effect on the process of advertising buying, and the information imparted in these events easily could be condensed into a two-page press release, which would eliminate the cost (estimated at a million dollars per network) of holding each presentation (Lafayette 2004). The function of the Upfront presentations derives more from their ritual status, their less tangible role in "buzz" creation, and the way they create an environment in which to publicly confirm speculation about scheduling announcements. As trade journalist P. J. Bednarski (1999, 16) notes, "Upfronts exist as a ritual, and as a coming-out party, a pep rally that tries to rev up the buying community."

The Upfront presentations derive their significance from their adjacency to the Upfront buying process—the period following the week of network presentations in which the broadcast networks sell 75 to 90 percent of the advertising time in the upcoming season of prime-time programming (Cable's Bucks 2003).¹ The presentations are designed to impress the advertisers before they commit their advertising budgets: a sum that amounted to more than nine billion United States dollars just for the broadcast networks in 2003. The presentations announce new programs and the new schedule with great fanfare (although the advertising

community is well aware of the extraordinary failure rate), allow the networks to establish their message (“we are number one in households; ‘upscale audiences;’ eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds”), and impress advertisers through a combination of elaborate performances, star presence, distinctive informational materials, and an extravagant luncheon or cocktail reception. Indeed, such demonstration is central to promotional culture. Although many advertisers have seen the content of new series in the presentations networks hold for major advertisers in late spring, new information and perspective emerge from observing how skillfully the networks communicate their vision to a mass audience and how they present the network’s identity for the new season.

The promotional practices of the presentations are embedded in the circuit of cultural production in other ways as well. The success of the promotional effort contributes to determining the textual forms that circulate stories and ideas within United States culture in significant ways and illustrates how the publicity machines at the networks define themselves, their programming, and how they present their network’s message to particular audiences. The events also inform how the dominant process for advertising purchase affects the types and content of texts networks include in their schedules. Sales and advertising departments plan the Upfront presentation with a specific audience in mind, and the content and voice of the network differ significantly from the promotional efforts used when addressing other audiences such as television critics or viewers. Studying a promotional venue such as the Upfront presentations reminds us of the very particular transaction involved in a commercial media industry. Although often obscured in the promotional efforts viewed by the audience, the primary commodity of a commercial television system is the production and sale of audiences to advertisers, not the sale of programming to viewers (Owen and Wildman 1992). Networks are the middle entity that sells programming to viewers and audiences to advertisers, and they reveal the identity they want advertisers to hold of them at the Upfront presentations.

Examining the presentations illustrates the particular operation of this dual client industry and affirms the need for sophisticated theory building that acknowledges the different strategies and norms for each client. The promotional strategies evident in the Upfront presentations indicate that the networks do not use the same techniques in promoting programming to both the market of viewers and advertisers. These presentations reveal what networks perceive as the attributes of their audiences and the most valuable aspects of their programming for advertisers, which in turn informs how and why a specific cultural system comes to produce certain texts or types of texts. Additionally, analysis of the Upfront presentations illustrates that they serve different purposes for the networks

that host and construct the events and the advertisers and media buyers who attend them. Specifically, the Upfront presentations suggest the importance of producing certain, less tangible outcomes—such as the creation of “buzz” or discussion, excitement, or interest in the network.² Various promotion activities become vital to corporate strategy as a result of the characteristic attributes of limited product diversity and overproduction common among cultural industries with a high degree of risk (Hesmondhalgh 2002). The Upfront presentations expose the complicated range of promotional efforts used to construct a perception of a network’s programming, mission, and brand position to maximize business aims. Analysis of the networks’ promotional identities reveals the maintenance of structures of power and dominance asserted by a commercial media system in which certain viewers are valued more than others.

The information and analysis reported here draws from observation of some 2003 Upfront presentations, informal interviews with various industry workers, and trade press accounts of the presentations and reports on their significance.³ I was able to secure an invitation to only one Upfront presentation by a major broadcast network (the WB), despite requesting invitations from all the networks. NBC and FOX sent videotapes of their presentations, which were helpful in identifying the conventions of the presentations. I also attended the Upfront presentation hosted by Spanish-language network Univision and an event held by Clear Channel Worldwide.

This difficulty gaining access highlights the internal nature of these events and suggests the challenges researchers face in studying promotional practices that precede the viewing audience. Although the anthropological practice of “studying up” (researching those with more relative power than the researcher) offers valuable methods, theories, and tools for those who study the media industries, gaining access to media elite and their daily practices remains a formidable obstacle in conducting this research.⁴ Many opportunities for institutional research are limited by the closed nature of most business operations. Literature produced by those with insider information most commonly takes the form of biographies that provide valuable information, but such books commonly are written from the perspective of lifetime executives motivated more by the opportunity to tell their stories than analyze industrial operations (Bedell 1981; Tinker and Rukeyser 1994; Tartikoff and Leerhsen 1993; Schneider and Pullen 2001; Weaver and Coffey 1993).⁵

Day-to-day internal operations and observation of the media industry elite remain difficult to access, but events, rituals, and practices that take place outside the walls of media corporations reveal much valuable information about industrial practice. Such events are often more accessible to researchers, and in some cases, special programs exist to facilitate academic

inclusion.⁶ Havens' (2002, 2003) research on global television fairs exemplifies this approach and indicates the information that personal observation can provide. The fairs operate as annual events that serve crucial business and ritual cultural functions, yet industry outsiders are afforded greater access because the events use a tradeshow venue in which hundreds of people circulate. Such events are also not the provenance of a single company—ancillary or trade groups typically administer them, which increases ease of access. Havens' experience contrasts with that of Gough-Yates (2003), who sought to study the industrial operation of the British women's magazine industry. Gough-Yates had difficulty gaining access to observe daily operations and ultimately was forced to base her research on the analysis of industry trade publications. The venue of the Upfront presentations bears greater similarity to the trade shows that Havens studies, as they take place outside the walls of corporate offices and are attended by hundreds who do not work specifically for the network and because their presentational form differs greatly from the atmosphere of internal meetings and decision making that Gough-Yates sought to observe.

A wide variety of approaches to studying media institutions exists. Historically, the two poles of administrative and applied research, which affirms existing structures and aims to provide practical information about the utility of practices, and political economy research, which examines capitalist allocations of power evident in media systems, have dominated publications. Other studies of media industries have applied theories of organizational research to yield more specific information about industrial practices (Hirsch 1972; Turow 1984, 1985, 1997). Since the mid-1980s, political economists have engaged in a dialogue and debate with the emergent theoretical and methodological suppositions of cultural studies, which has at times placed little focus on media institutions and more recently provided broad, holistic frameworks through which the interconnections among aspects of production, economics, and culture can be studied together. The "cultural industries" (Hesmondhalgh 2002) or "cultural economy" (du Gay and Pryke 2002, 6) approaches to studying media industries provide particularly valuable theoretical frameworks for exploring research based in institutional sites, because they acknowledge the breadth, interrelations, and contradictions of practices involved in creating cultural texts in commercial and public media systems. These broad frameworks, particularly those theorizing a complicated and interconnected "circuit of cultural production" (du Gay et al. 1997, 3), recognize the importance of micro-level process and practices, whereas most previous theorization of the media industries stressed macro-level factors such as ownership and regulation.

Theoretical frameworks that take a cultural approach to institutional media practices and economics are most useful for exploring the significance provided by the smaller yet crucial processes in the production of culture, such as the case of internal promotion explored here. Such frameworks understand cultural production in commercial media systems as often “complex, ambivalent, and contested,” which is useful when accounting for the varied economic and cultural aspects of media industries (Hesmondhalgh 2002, 3). The theoretical frameworks produced by Hesmondhalgh, du Gay et al. (1997), and du Gay and Pryke (2002) and the applications of those frameworks in the research of Havens (2002, 2003), Gough-Yates (2003), and that reported and analyzed here do not assume a simple top-down operation of power and acknowledge that control of capital is not the only determinant of cultural power. Despite the less unequivocal claims about the cultural consequences of capital flow, conglomeration, and globalization possible with such a model, this framework provides valuable tools for understanding the significance and role of the varied components of the circuit of culture.

Of these components, promotion has been particularly understudied by all approaches used to explore media practice and its role in culture. Wernick's (1991) theorization of promotional culture offers a broad framework for understanding the increased and ever-present nature of promotion in society but provides little specifically relevant to a focused case exploring internal promotion. The attention that du Gay et al. (1997) afford to exploring the articulation of promotion within the production and consumption of the Walkman in their case study contributes a similarly focused illustration, although, as is common, their analysis primarily explores the connection of promotion with consumers rather than the internal promotional venue considered here. Consequently, Havens' (2002, 2003) work on the promotional function of global television fairs bears the most similarity to this endeavor.

Some recent mass-communication scholarship has focused new attention on promotion; however, this work mainly examines the promotions that networks use on-air to draw viewers to their programs or to create and affirm a network brand perception among viewers (see essays in Eastman 2000). Many of the cognitive, programming, and advertising theories used in this research can be applied to the context of selling programming and brands to media buyers and advertisers, so long as research accounts for the specific knowledge and increased awareness of this audience. Eastman (2000) enumerates five changes in the media industry and culture of media consumption that have contributed to the increased importance of promotion for television networks: the rising costs of program production and licensing, the expanded number of program channels, the rapid rise of online media, federal and state deregulation of

the media, and the impact of the adoption of new user technologies (p. 5). The case of the Upfront presentations explored here illustrates the particular significance of the increase in program channels (as well as competition from the broader "out of home" media environment) to identify challenges for promotional departments seeking for their shows to find audiences and maintain the status quo allocation of power. Research by marketing scholars on branding also can be informative; however, significant discrepancies exist between the general corporate environment and the specific situation of the United States television industry (see essays in Schultz, Hatch, and Larsen 2000).⁷ Significantly, no existing academic research explores either the Upfront presentations or the institutional importance of this buying process. Ken Auletta (1991) briefly mentions the presentations in his detailed examination of the operation of the United States broadcast networks in the late 1980s. His focus, however, emphasizes the implications of the buying process rather than the presentations (see also Poltrack 1983; Blumenthal and Goodenough 1998).

The Function of the Upfront Presentations

The schedule announcements are the primary "purpose" of the presentations, but the true function of the events for the broadcast networks results from their efforts to create a positive attitude toward the network. Regardless of the schedule or the new shows occupying that schedule, the networks seek to excite advertisers about their programming plans, and they use public relations tools to clearly establish a network message. Ultimately, networks measure the success of a presentation by whether advertisers leave the presentation aware of the network plan for the year and if the programming that the network announces creates "buzz"—or word of mouth. In other words, the most successful network is often the one being talked about (unless the discussion is in unequivocally negative terms). In many cases, buzz may be created by an unconventional move about which there is considerable debate or a new series that defies convention. The significance of buzz is evident in what industry journalist Greg Spring (1998) characterizes as the ubiquitous conversation starter during the Upfronts: "What are you hearing?" There may be speculation that programming or scheduling designs will not succeed, but it is of crucial importance to have people talking about a network during the condensed period of the Upfront presentations and buying process.

The function of the Upfront for the advertisers and the media buyers and planners with which they contract is related to but does not exactly mirror the desires of the networks. Media buyers and planners attend the presentations with a critical eye, seeking information about the new schedule and content of new shows but also seeking to identify the unspoken

aspects of the presentations: to read the absences to gain a sense of the real position of the network. Much of the information made available in the presentations will be reiterated in one-on-one meetings with network sales teams, and entire pilot episodes are made available as well. The large space of the Upfront presentation creates a mass context in which a buyer can “read” the room. Observing how a large audience responds to information or programming adds additional perspective for those who seek to determine what is unspoken: the network’s weaknesses.

A successful Upfront experience for an advertiser or buyer may well be the failed Upfront for the network. Although neither network executives nor media buyers can predict audience response to the majority of programs with great certainty, a network that reveals itself to be anxious, hesitant, or internally conflicted in its message or programming sends a clear message to advertisers to resist rate increases or buy elsewhere. The Upfront audience attends with the knowledge that the networks will deliver carefully crafted messages designed to sell the audience on the network. It is often difficult to rank the middle-ground of programming, but the presentations have the potential to at least expose those in danger of failure, which can be helpful in thinning the field of options.

In addition to disclosing information about the regular operation of the Upfront presentation, the year of this study also revealed information about the changing nature of the United States television industry. Beginning in the mid-1980s, changes in industrial relations resulting from the rise of new competitors (cable), increasingly conglomerated ownership structures, new technologies, and regulatory modifications initiated a period of widespread institutional adjustment. The alteration in norms and practices has continued for nearly two decades, and some aspects of the 2003 Upfront indicated the struggle between residual and emergent practices and the allocation of power at stake in the maintenance of the status quo. Broadcasters increasingly find their status as the primary hosts of Upfront events under assault. Various cable networks have begun holding Upfront events, with a few more adding presentations each year. Most cable networks do not align their schedules with the seasonal organization that has been common among broadcasters, making the need for and timing of the Upfront event arbitrary. Rather, their increasing presence is clearly intended as a strategy aimed at competing more directly with broadcasters for advertising dollars. Cable networks continue to seek prices for their advertising time that are more comparable to broadcast networks’ (relative to the size of the audience they deliver); cable networks owned by a conglomerate also owning broadcast networks have gained advantages through cross-platform deals as well. Consequently, the cable networks apparently understand the ritual importance of participating in the Upfront to appear more like the broadcast networks that continue to dominate the industry.

This effort toward inclusion extended beyond television networks, and the transitional status of the Upfront and the United States television industry itself was suggested by another anomaly in 2003: an Upfront presentation by a media company only tangentially related to the television industry. Clear Channel Worldwide, a conglomerate owning twelve hundred United States radio stations (at the time), thirty-seven television stations (but no networks), an entertainment division that is the largest producer and promoter of live entertainment in the world, an "outdoor" division that sells advertising space on billboards, taxi tops, and mall and airport signs, and one thousand web-sites, challenged the Upfront presentations as a venue for television networks and their preeminent control of advertising dollars. Clear Channel held a talent-studded event it called an "Outfront" presentation for its "Gone From Home Network." The conglomerate capitalized on the presence of media executives attending the broadcast Upfront presentations to tout its research indicating the amount of time that people spend away from home (and consequently away from their televisions).

As in a broadcast Upfront presentation, the company promoted its event by featuring appearances and performances by various stars: recording artist Jewel, the cast of the Broadway production *The Producers*, and radio stars Rick Dees, Rush Limbaugh, Ryan Seacrest, and Carson Daly. The entertainment served to draw and satiate the audience of one thousand so that it would listen to a fifteen-minute presentation in which Clear Channel executives explained that almost 70 percent of adults ages twenty-five to fifty-four are away from home eight to twelve hours a day. Advertisers spend only ten billion dollars per year to reach consumers during the majority of their day out of the home and spend ninety billion on the four to five waking hours spent at home. Advancing awareness of such data is vital for Clear Channel, a company that predominantly controls advertising spaces that reach audiences when they are away from home.

The existence of Clear Channel's Outfront event and the research that they presented indicates how changes in the industry and the culture of media consumption contribute to the contestation of established media rituals such as the Upfront presentations. It also provides evidence suggesting that the adjustments in industry operations constitute significant and wide-reaching alterations in the previous norms of the circuit of culture. Not only did Clear Channel invade the space of this industry ritual, but its research suggested that the mythology supporting the dominance of United States broadcasting was fundamentally flawed.

Clear Channel's participation in the 2003 Upfront informs the complexity of the relationship among media industries and the varied cross-industry dynamics affecting specific cultural industries. The competition

between broadcasters and cable is also evident in the rhetoric used in the presentations. Many of the networks made a point to reassert the mythology of broadcast primacy. Both the addition of Upfront events by non-broadcast groups and the discourse used in Upfront presentations illustrate the economically significant function that this largely symbolic ritual event plays in cultural production. Furthermore, the entrance of additional media entities into the Upfront events indicates the continual contestation of norms and resources that the broadcast networks must expend to maintain the perception of their preeminence.

The Upfront Presentations: Practice, Ritual, Celebration

The Upfront presentations provide a rich textual site that is full of information about industry priorities, norms, and values. At a most basic level, the Upfront presentations communicate the identity of the network and its direction for the year to come to those on whom the network depends for financing. The presentations are primarily promotional events, although the very specific audience that the presentations reach makes the identity that the networks choose to construct distinct from the identity that the promotional departments present in their interstitial advertisements or in venues in which they address the mainstream press. In many ways, the networks use older marketing and advertising strategies, the type common before the 1920s that focused primarily on the features of the product (Jhally 1995). Rather than the image-based advertising that the networks use in promotions to viewers that create a fantasy in which the viewer wants to participate, the networks use information-based appeals when promoting internally. The networks emphasize information and objective data in the presentations, but each network augments its message by attempting to create an impressive experience through venue, decoration, entertainment, star presence, and other promotional components.

Because of the lack of research and difficulty of gaining access to these events, the following pages include substantial description of the presentational atmosphere to aid readers in "seeing" this event. This description illustrates the different strategies used in an internal promotional context, and the interwoven analysis explores the variant strategies of the networks and how a network's institutional position affects its promotional strategy.

Constructing an Experience, Selling a Plan

There may be hundreds of other things going on in New York on any given day, but one can see evidence of the Upfront presentations on the

streets in a way that adds to the event status of the presentations and their atmosphere. Generally, the same thousand people (those not employed by a network) attend all of the events, so clear pedestrian traffic patterns emerge as the venue of the moment moves around the relatively compact midtown area. Signs of the presentations trickle out onto the streets as paparazzi and fans wait outside the venues to glimpse stars, and various companies make use of the compact venue by sending people wearing promotional placards into the street. Because these weeks in late May bring so many of the now Los Angeles-based television industry executives back to New York, various other events such as trade meetings and awards ceremonies are held throughout the week to maximize attendance, which also contributes to the atmosphere and "event" status of Upfront week. The Upfronts provide a significant enough interruption in the New York life cycle for the *New York Times* to publish a supplement section that is mostly advertising content, but the stories make the specific industry issues usually found only in the trade press available to a general interest audience.

Within the individual presentation venues, the seating capacity creates scarcity so that attendance is by invitation only. The networks carefully distribute media credentials, and journalists are often forced to view the presentations in "overflow" rooms via closed-circuit television. Some networks rely on the symbolic value of their locations, while others elaborately dress their space as an extension of their brand identity. Most networks hold their presentations in places that afford an element of cultural capital and mythic imagination, such as Radio City Music Hall or Carnegie Hall. The WB held its presentation in a ballroom of a hotel but metamorphosed this space by elaborately adorning it with floor-to-ceiling scaffolding on both sides of the room that displayed enormous, glamorous photos of the network's stars. The photo collage included network stars of the past, present, and those of the series announced in the presentation.⁸ The WB brand identity was further present in the visceral experience, including the throbbing bass of contemporary music that provided the audio background while the audience waited for the presentation to begin. The space of the ballroom clearly communicated the message of the event: the WB is a fun, young space full of beautiful people.

The construction of the ballroom space did more than immerse the audience in the WB brand. The main video screen at the front of the ballroom (as well as the eighteen flat-panel screens framing it) featured a slide presentation of clippings from newspapers and trade publications with headlines that announced the youth-targeted strategies of corporations as varied as Proctor & Gamble, Starbucks, soda companies, McDonald's, cell phone service providers, Oldsmobile, Coors, Perrier, Jeep, Buick, Old Spice, Miracle-Gro, and Whirlpool. The articles were projected only long

enough for the audience to read the headlines that claimed the spending capability of “twenty-somethings,” young couples, newlyweds, and students and the varying success that the companies had reaching them. This aspect of the presentation reveals the specificity of the event, the particularity of the audience, and what the WB identifies as its primary selling point. The WB attracted the youngest median-age viewer of any broadcast network, which made it particularly attractive to advertisers. The message of the WB presentation consequently focused on reasserting this selling point while also seeking to convince advertisers selling goods not typically associated with the youth audience, such as life insurance and major home appliances, that the youth audience provides an untapped market. This preliminary material set the stage for the dominant message to evolve from this and other presentations about the qualities of the audiences that various networks deliver.

In addition to the selection of venue and the networks’ decision of how to adorn that space, their incorporation of entertainment also contributes to the message of the presentation and the construction of the brand. Entertainment of the audience during the presentation, in tandem with the use of the network’s star talent, are central strategies that the networks use to differentiate their presentations and provide the audience with a favorable and distinct impression of the experience. The strategies through which the various networks (the WB, NBC, FOX, Univision) accomplished this differentiation varied in subtle yet discernible ways. FOX opened its two-hour presentation with stars of its ratings juggernaut *American Idol*. Contestants Ruben Studdard and Clay Aiken performed via satellite from Los Angeles (just days before one would be declared the season’s winner) and then performed with the previous season’s finalists, Kelly Clarkson and Justin Guarini, who were live at the theater in New York. FOX followed the ten-minute performance with a short video spoof of its hit series *24*. NBC deviated subtly by opening with a nearly four-minute branding montage that displayed the scope of NBC: highlighting its dominance in prime time, late night, news, and daytime and the breadth of its identity with networks Bravo, Telemundo, CNBC, and MSNBC. NBC then entertained its audience with a ten-minute “rock opera” featuring known songs with lyrics altered to make them about NBC, performed by the cast of *Will & Grace*. Like FOX, NBC followed the performance with a short, humorous video that revealed how network president Jeff Zucker might have lured the cast of *Friends* back for another season. NBC’s film played on the insider knowledge of the audience, drawing most laughs from a segment in which Zucker visits a twelve-step-program meeting for “television executives who lost their number one show” and finds Warren Littlefield (one of Zucker’s predecessors) ranting about Jerry Seinfeld’s refusal to continue his show.

Alternatively, the WB opened its presentation with a fairly long (approximately eight minutes) video collage focused on constructing the WB brand. The cinematic and melodramatic nature of many of the network's programs lent itself to the production of an engaging visual experience that captured the palpable emotion common to many of the network's series. Rather than entertainment by specific network stars, the video captured the brand identity of the network, which includes a more uniform visual style and narrative intensity than found on other networks. Compared with the NBC video, the WB montage functioned more to connect with the audience on an emotive or visceral level rather than to inform.

Beyond the opening of the presentations in which most of the networks focused their entertainment and star power, the different uses of stars throughout the presentations revealed the networks' discrepant institutional and brand positions relative to the Upfront audience. FOX introduced stars including Bernie Mac, Kiefer Sutherland, and Simon Cowell throughout the presentation. The stars typically spoke for a minute and offered clearly scripted, rote thanks to the advertisers and the network for their support. Kelly Clarkson performed another song at the end of the presentation, and FOX closed the event by bringing the main cast members of most of its series (and at least some from all series) on stage. In contrast, NBC featured five-minute live comedy segments by both Whoopi Goldberg (promoting her new series) and Jay Leno during its presentation. The WB made use of various star personalities by having series' stars including Reba McEntire, Treat Williams, Jamie Kennedy, Michael Rosenbaum, and Stephen Collins assist the network's president of entertainment, Jordan Levin, by introducing a night of programming for the schedule. Most of these presentations were scripted, while Michael Rosenbaum and Jamie Kennedy seemed to deviate significantly from the likely script and included "off-color" humor. The WB also closed its presentation by amassing the stars from new series and representatives from returning series on stage (all dressed in black) for display at the conclusion of the presentation.

The strategy of each network was clearly driven by its institutional position, network identity, and primary audience. The advertisers, buyers, and media in the audience are not, for the most part, among the intended audience of the WB, which focuses on viewers from twelve to thirty-four years of age. Although the network features youthful and beautiful talent, its stars are not among those that the audience of advertisers and buyers would be most impressed by, and the immaturity and youthful sensibility of its actors even present a liability, as an extemporaneous presentation by Michael Rosenbaum indicated. It is also not coincidental that the network relied primarily on the adult actors starring in

its series. As actors who play parents, McEntire, Williams, and Collins are not featured in promotional material targeted to the viewing audience, but they are the talent with the most cachet for an audience of advertisers and buyers. Instead of relying on its talent to persuade and impress the audience, the WB skillfully used the first-rate video montage (the quality of which may be surpassed only by some of HBO's branding spots) and the concept of its stars—seen but not heard—to illustrate the mastery with which the WB developed a well-defined niche that included audiences among those most attractive to advertisers. Precisely because of the consonance between the NBC program focus and the Upfront attendees, NBC could make greater use of its talent as performers who were both seen and heard. Of all the networks, NBC probably features the most programming that would be attractive to its Upfront audience when they are at home as television viewers, allowing the network to emphasize different entertainment features than those available to the WB and FOX. As the incumbent ratings leader, NBC could also assert a tone of supremacy that differed from that of FOX, whose tone was much more that of a network seeking to prove itself.

Beyond venue, decoration, entertainment, and star presence, the networks differentiate themselves in subtle ways. All networks present video clips of their new shows, and these clips serve both explicit and implicit promotional functions. Explicitly, they reveal the content of the series and provide the advertisers with a brief sense of the series. Implicitly, these clips also contribute to constructing the network identity and a perception of the network. The clips are brief, only suggest the tone and content of the series, and are similar to a film trailer in function and style.⁹ The length of clips varied, perhaps mainly as a result of the number of new programs each network had to present. FOX introduced fourteen new shows in four-and-a-half-minute clips, while NBC presented only eight new shows and used longer clips. NBC also included separate video montages featuring the network's late-night programming, specials, sports, and returning series *Friends*.

The networks then hold receptions or lunches after their presentations. At the WB presentation, attendees were treated to a luncheon thematically set in the small town of Stars Hollow that serves as the setting of *Gilmore Girls*. The network reproduced various locales such as Luke's Diner and Taylor's Ice Cream Shoppe as well as food stations providing New England cuisine not explicitly linked to the series. Few stars ventured into the exceptionally crowded lunch space. Most finished promotional interviews with the press in lobby spaces and were greeted by fans who had massed outside the hotel to catch a glimpse of them as they left. The networks also provide attendees with small promotional items. The seat of each attendee of the WB presentation held a glossy binder featuring

information about new and returning series and a small bottle of water (adorned with the WB logo).

In addition to the use of venue, decoration, entertainment, stars, and extravagant lunches to create a distinct experience that leaves attendees with a favorable evaluation of the network, the Upfront presentations also include a requisite amount of information about the network that reveals its priorities and what it believes to be important to advertisers. This part of the presentation is typically located after the introductory comments and before the networks announce the new schedule and is presented by a network sales executive. The networks make presentations that rival those of the most accomplished political spin doctors, focusing on the year's audience data to best reflect the network's accomplishments and communicate its business model message. The promotional function of the Upfront presentation is explicitly clear in this part of the presentation.

At the WB presentation, executive vice-president of sales, Bill Morningstar, emphasized the demographic focus of the WB and reiterated the common industry perception of the value that youthful audiences provide. He also reported data suggesting this audience's value for advertisers of cars, credit cards, and life insurance in addition to those selling products such as soda and candy that are typically associated with this market (to reiterate the message of opening slides). Similarly, FOX's president of sales, Jon Nesvig, presented the ubiquitous ratings slides, in this case highlighting FOX's strength among eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old audience members, particularly since the beginning of 2003. In addition to the prime-time lineup that would compose the rest of the presentation, Nesvig reminded advertisers of FOX sports, which held licenses for the World Series, NFL football, and NASCAR. Chairman of the FOX entertainment group, Sandy Grushow, then made the case for FOX based on the network's "momentum, strong development, stable schedule, and protected time periods." Grushow reminded the audience that FOX's audience had grown during the year and that its hits performed well in upscale households, among both men and women, and in various younger demographic categories. NBC's message focused on its number-one status in all day parts and the upscale audience that many of its shows deliver.

The Upfront presentations are rich sites for illustrating what networks believe advertisers desire of the audiences of the shows in which they purchase programming, and they indicate networks' efforts to set the agenda in emphasizing what they seek for advertisers to prioritize. The repeated use of *upscale* to distinguish the average household income of audiences viewing a particular show suggests the degree to which income level has joined age and gender as a primary demographic

attribute on which advertisers evaluate audiences.¹⁰ The emphasis in each of the presentations on the networks' rankings in specific demographic groups also reveals an important measurement that has increasingly affected programming. As the broadcasters continue to lose audience members year after year to more narrowly targeted cable networks, they have switched to emphasizing their rank among other broadcasters rather than touting the size of their ever-diminishing audiences.

Not all of the network message focused on rankings. In the 2003 Upfront, the disparaging of reality television was a repeated mantra at nearly every presentation. The concern with reality was not a critique of stable performers such as *American Idol* and *Survivor* but of the less developed reality ventures that networks had used during 2002 and 2003 to fill time slots previously occupied by poorly performing scripted series (e.g., *Are You Hot?* and *All-American Girl*). Such shows particularly concerned advertisers because they had bought time in scripted series that networks later cancelled and were left with advertising spots in the reality series. Based on the consistent discourse deprecating reality and emphasizing networks' scripted fare, advertisers must have expressed considerable concern to the networks about not allowing this "buy and switch" to happen again. Consequently, networks repeatedly affirmed qualities such as possessing the largest percentage of scripted programming and having a balanced schedule and affirmed advertisers' beliefs that the reliance on scripted series builds trust and habit with viewers and provides a known product for advertisers. Indicating the speed of change in this industry, in 2004 Upfront presentations, the disparagement of and stigma attached to reality series had abated. Many networks included planned reality series as part of their presentations, focusing their message instead on how their use of unscripted series would enable them to present new programming year-round.

Conclusion

This focused exploration of the Upfront presentations reveals the significant promotional functions of this annual event and the disparity between promotional strategies used in internal contexts and those targeting viewers in this dual-client industry. Networks use markedly different strategies when promoting goods to advertisers, indicating the need for varied theories and models to explain promotion and advertising in internal promotion situations.

A number of strategies differentiate internal promotional practices from those used in external promotion to audiences. First, ritual practices are particularly significant. Interpersonal relationships and business dealings developed during many years are crucial to the buying process.

Consequently, the Upfront presentations derive value by providing a space in which these relationships can be reestablished before the buying process begins. The celebratory atmosphere that the presentations create is conducive to networking and informal conversations on which business relationships and deals can be built.

Secondly, while establishing a coherent brand is an important strategy for targeting audiences (particularly in the postnetwork era), brand establishment is also important in internal promotion, although in different ways. Networks seek to hail viewers with a brand identity that leads viewers to watch the network out of a desire to be part of the space that the network creates; it is built on an identity-based appeal. In reaching advertisers, networks concentrate on linking goods with the audiences that they reach. Information, data, and research consequently are far more persuasive tools in internal promotional venues. This strategy was particularly evident in the efforts of the WB to convince manufacturers of durable goods and life insurance that youthful audiences provide an untapped market. Whereas promotion to viewers commonly uses image and identification-based strategies, the promotional appeal to advertisers highlights information and analysis that persuasively communicates the value of the audience that the network already delivers.

Image remains important, however, and networks' ability to compellingly use venue, decoration, stars, and entertainment still contributes to the perception of the network. This was apparent following the 2004 Upfront presentations in which nearly every article covering the events began by noting that the CBS presentation concluded with a performance by the remaining members of the rock band The Who. Mention of the strength of its schedule appeared at some point in the articles, but the CBS entertainment was what everyone was talking about. The network was consequently able to affirm its competitive position by providing its audience with such an unconventional show.¹¹

In other internal promotional venues, the primary strategies may vary, but they remain distinct from those used in external promotion to viewers. Havens (2002, 2003) similarly identifies strategies incorporating ritual that create intangible value (buzz), cultivate relationships between buyers and sellers, and use information strategically (positioning of products relative to genre and particular national contexts) in his examinations of global television fairs. The internal promotional spaces of domestic syndication fairs function similarly to the international fairs that Havens studies, while the promotional space of the annual television critics tour (in which networks present new series to journalistic television critics) indicates different promotional strategies. Here, networks instead focus on articulating artistic merit, stature of actors or creative talent, or distinction of the series. Although this promotional message is closer to the

one used to reach viewers, it still differs as critics are also internal entities with their own role in production of culture, what Bordieu (1984) describes as that of new cultural intermediaries.

In addition to suggesting distinct strategies at work in internal promotion, the rhetoric and construction of the event indicate the priorities and assumptions of the industry. Observing the events reveals the arbitrary yet uniform conventions of the presentations as well as industry preferences and emphases. The standard format of the presentations—of entertaining introductions, ratings data presentations, and new schedule announcements—exposes one set of information, while the variance among presentations (within the standard format) imparts another. The WB's use of stars who are seen but not heard, compared with NBC's use of stars, indicates the assets and the liabilities that the networks face in selling themselves to the very specific audience of the Upfront presentations. The ability of the networks to conduct successful Upfront presentations is crucial to their success in the Upfront buying process that determines the advertiser support with which the networks will fund their creation of texts during the subsequent year. The efforts of cable networks, Spanish-language broadcasters, and media entities such as Clear Channel to "interlope" into the rituals of the week further underscores the symbolic value that they believe inclusion to provide, even as the balance of power within the television industry persists through the current period of adjustment.

The broader context of the entire Upfront presentation week and its relation to the Upfront buying process also exposes the complicated nature of the television business. Although the Upfront buying process arguably possesses a more substantial practical function, it too appears an antiquated convention linked to the network era. Critically reading the physical spaces of industry practices or simply considering them from the perspective that they are not inherent or natural—making them strange—reveals information about cultural practice and power unattainable if events are considered only in terms of organizational function.

The Upfront presentations provide a useful case for understanding the importance of even the most ephemeral aspects of this industry; in this case, the millions of dollars that the networks spend in the hope of creating the right speculation about their network and buzz about their programming. Such ephemeral factors gain their value as a result of the industry's need to compensate for the great uncertainty and sizable risk resultant from the cultural product that it produces. Although aspects of promotion have not been emphasized in many critical industrial analyses of media institutions, the role of promotion—to both the audience of viewers and the advertisers who subsidize the industry—cannot be underestimated as a crucial component in the circuit of cultural production. The determination of which texts succeed, produce hundreds of episodes, and

come to be widely shared cultural texts versus those that disappear after a few airings often has much more to do with promotion than inherent textual features or aesthetics, further underscoring the importance of promotion within the process of textual creation.

Notes

1. See Lotz (forthcoming) for description and analysis of the role of the Upfront buying process on the production of United States television.

2. See Havens (2003) for more on the importance of creating buzz in institutional media rituals.

3. See Ryan (2003) and Bednarski (2003) for the trade press account of all of the broadcast networks' Upfront presentations.

4. Nader (1972) provides one of the earliest perspectives on studying up.

5. An exception might be the collection of interviews and analysis published in Ohmann et al. (1996). This collection includes interviews with various executives who work in the culture industries that were conducted by scholars who also include analysis of the information gained from the interviews.

6. For example, the National Association of Television Program Executives (NATPE) and National Cable and Telecommunication Association (NCTA) offer special programs and reduced rates for faculty who attend their annual conference and tradeshow. The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences conducts a faculty development program that takes a select group of faculty behind the scenes of the daily operation of various aspects of television—from production meetings to shooting to network scheduling. The International Radio and Television Society holds a similar faculty seminar but focuses more on the business practices of the industry compared with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' (ATAS) emphasis on creative development.

7. For example, price is a major determinant of choice and brand status for products that consumers pay for directly, while there is no cost in selecting a network or no cost differential in choosing ESPN versus Lifetime (although this can be factored as an issue with premium cable channels such as HBO). Furthermore, while it is customary for a company to establish a corporate brand as well as individualized product brands (the brand of Ford relative to its Explorer vehicle), media corporations are rarely branded at the corporate level, while branding at a network level remains very important (for example, the lack of a Time Warner brand relative to the brand of CNN versus that of the WB versus that of HBO).

8. The haphazard blending of talent recreated the familiar nature asserted in its 1999 "Faces of the WB" branding advertisements that interchanged cast members of different shows in a way that suggested friendships and community among the characters and actors of various series. This strategy was particularly appropriate given the identity of the network as the location for young viewers, and it fit what some have identified as the network's star-making machine (Hibbard 2003, 36).

9. In 2004, NBC broke with convention and presented the entire pilot episode of the series *Joey*, likely because of the exceptional amount of speculation about

this series that had the onerous task of replacing the hit series *Friends* in the network's lineup.

10. This is commonly known by industry workers, but popular press reporting of ratings rarely acknowledges the valuation of audiences by categories other than age.

11. CBS had arguably had the most successful season in 2003–2004 and was poised to take the lead in viewers age eighteen to forty-nine in the new season. The longtime leader in this group, NBC, was retiring hit series *Friends* and *Frasier*, and the buzz about NBC was that its new schedule could not compare with its previous successes. The Who performance helped fuel positive speculation that CBS was a network able to continue its recent gains among younger audiences.

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Amanda D. Lotz is an assistant professor of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan. She is the author of Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era (University of Illinois Press, 2006), which explores the rise of female-centered dramas and cable networks targeted toward women in the late 1990s as they relate to changes in the United States television industry, and various journal articles and book chapters about television.