GENRE WELCOME?: FORMULA, GENRE AND BRANDING IN USA NETWORK'S
PROGRAMMING AND PROMOTIONAL CONTENT

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ABSTRACT

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In the fragmented post-network era of television, networks are looking for any advantage in attracting audiences. One way networks try to draw attention is through branding. Branding helps networks stand out among the hundreds of other choices, but can also link all of a network’s programming under one carefully-crafted theme. When viewers access a network’s content from numerous devices, it is crucial that each experience evokes similar images, styles and themes. It is my assertion that cable giant USA Network has succeeded with its branding campaign like no other contemporary television network. By combining a programming formula of blue skies, cool cases and pretty faces with thematically-connected branding under the “Characters Welcome” label, USA Network and its structurally formulaic programs are activated into a new genre of television. This activation from formula into genre is accomplished narratively, thematically and aesthetically within the programs themselves, but is primarily driven by the commodification of those narratives, themes and aesthetics through an overarching branding campaign (television spots, on-screen chyrons, print ads, web sites, Tweets, various other intertextual directives) that promises diverting, but not mindless, fare. The brand emphasizes escapism and inclusivity through sunshine-drenched imagery and a laid-back, summertime ideology. Using Jason Mittell suggestion television genres exist as “cultural categories” created through discourse, this thesis discusses how USA Network exists as a generic category shaped by branding and how critics and audiences embrace and acknowledge that generic category.
To J.L. Forever welcome.
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INTRODUCTION. GENRE WELCOME?: FORMULA, GENRE AND BRANDING IN USA NETWORK’S PROGRAMMING AND PROMOTIONAL CONTENT

“Today when considering scripts, [former USA Network President, now NBC Universal Cable President Bonnie] Hammer and her team ask a routinized series of questions: Does the show have a fun sensibility? Does it have a ‘blue sky’ tone of hopefulness? Does it revolve around an ‘aspirational,’ if quirky, lead character with a moral and ethical center? Potential shows are scored based on how closely they match these dictates; only high scorers make it on air.” – Johnnie L. Roberts, Newsweek, 2009

Although it is something of a simplistic list, the batch of questions used in USA Network’s developmental process outlined by former USA Network President Bonnie Hammer to Newsweek reporter Johnnie L. Roberts easily and succinctly describes the cable network’s formula. What started out as the sports-centric, middling Madison Square Network in the early 1970s that continued to undergo identity and name changes throughout the cable television expansions of the 1980s and 1990s has now blossomed into the most watched basic cable network during primetime viewing hours. A number of factors contributed to USA Network’s major successes over the last decade. First, the smart decision making of the network’s executives like Bonnie Hammer and recently appointed Jeff Wachtel led to a consistent run of new scripted programming that has been generally well-received by critics and fans alike. Secondly, Vivendi’s 2001 purchase of USA Network and the subsequent 2004 merger of Vivendi and NBC that created NBC Universal (hereafter referred to as NBCU) placed USA Network inside one of the world’s largest media conglomerates. This position surely permitted USA Network all the benefits of horizontal and vertical integration wherein NBC Universal
Media Studios can produce series in-house or easily cut profitable deals with other large production studios, air the series on USA Network and market them across the media conglomerate’s countless other arms of content output. Finally and, I will argue most importantly, USA Network has succeeded because of its stylistically appealing branding campaign that emphasizes the thematic and aesthetic connections between all products of the network’s programming formula. This distinctive combination of branding, formula and genre has been fully digested and embraced by critics, audiences and the television industry as whole wherein now the phrase “USA Network programming” denotes very specific meanings in promotional and programming content. With branding becoming an ever-integral aspect of the television industry, the current state of USA Network serves as an exceptional case study of how commerce and art blend overtly and successfully, but it also presents a possible path for how television networks, channels and the industry as a whole could change in years to come.

Of course, these three facets of USA Network’s strategy are interrelated. Without attractive, similarly-themed content, the branding campaign might not work, and without said branding, audiences might not tune in to the series no matter how attractive or good they are. Without the economic and production advantages that come along with being part of one of the world’s largest media conglomerates, USA Network might not have been able to produce or promote at the highest levels. It is in this interconnected relationship between production and promotion where USA Network has taken a formulaic template of programming and turned it into one of the biggest and most recognizable stables of content in American television. By combining a programming formula of blue skies, cool cases and pretty faces with a thematically-connected branding campaign all under the “Characters Welcome” label, USA Network has taken its similar, formulaic batch of programs and “activated” them into a separate generic
category. This activation from formula into genre is accomplished narratively, thematically and aesthetically within the programs themselves, but is primarily driven by the commodification of those narratives, themes and aesthetics through an overarching branding campaign (TV spots, on-screen chyrons, print ads, web sites, Tweets, scheduling and various other paratextual and intertextual directives) that promises escapist, but not mindless, fare to the viewers. These programming and branding strategies emphasize escapism through sunshine-drenched imagery and a laid-back, summertime ideology. Primarily using concepts introduced by television scholar Jason Mittell that suggest television genres exist more as discursive, “cultural categories” instead of features found within the texts themselves, I will discuss how USA Network’s content works not only as a formula, but also a branding-activated generic category that has been subsequently embraced and acknowledged by critics and audiences. This analysis will first require a discussion of the distinctions between formula, genre and branding and various scholarly perspectives on how each exists within popular culture texts. Furthermore, this project will feature textual analyses of USA Network’s branding materials and programs, and also a survey of online critical and fan response and discussion.

Moreover, it is my intent to explore not only how USA Network content exists as its own formula and its own genre, but also what major impact these creations have had on the programming itself. I have identified a number of specific conventions particularly identifiable to the USA Network generic category, apart from the obvious structural similarities that exist with a group of texts that fit within similar formulaic frameworks. First, USA Network programming is powered by a very specific type of lead Character (hereby noted with the capital-C as to differentiate from the normal use of “character”) who straddles the line between official hero and outlaw hero status. This lead Character has a number of unique skills and while he/she often uses
them to assist law enforcement entities, the lead Character is generally (but not always) not employed by said entities. He/she helps people, but through distinctive, sometimes illegal means. In certain cases there are two leads who share these traits (such as *Psych*’s Shawn and Gus), but the definitions still fit nonetheless. By combining this textual component of USA Network series with the network’s branding slogan of “Characters Welcome,” the lead Character(s) can be referred to as “the Character” of their respective series. Secondly, USA Network programming is also built around a very specific narrative-arc structure, one that relies heavily on cliffhangers and MacGuffin-type objects and searches that propel not just individual episodes or seasons, but entire series. This storytelling approach provides temporary, short-term answers, but regularly pushes the details of the series’ ongoing mystery further away from the Character. When part of the mystery is solved at the end of a season, other avenues open up that the Character must explore. These two overarching textual similarities that all USA Network series share (in some form) are also emphasized in the branding content and linked directly into the promises of escapism and inclusiveness and the commodification of summertime. The interconnectedness between the cable network’s branding and programming strategies produces curious and complicated implications, for the business and production practices of 21st century television.

**Why USA Network? Why now?**

Although I think that I have made the argument for USA Network as a particularly compelling case study of the 21st century “post-network” cable network, providing some historical and industrial contextualization will make this clearer. Never has it been more difficult to run a television network than it is in the early years of the 21st century. We have long passed the time of the three major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) dominating the competition for viewer attention. With hundreds of super-niche cable networks providing very
specific content to small, targeted audiences and countless avenues for online streaming opening up on a regular basis, the era of the traditional “mass” television audience is over. The admittedly-flawed Nielsen ratings have declined across broadcast television on a fairly consistent basis over the last decade, wherein what is now considered a “good” rating would have gotten a series cancelled in a heartbeat just a few years ago. Prospective viewers are now pulled in dozens of different directions by producers, meaning that watching television in the most traditional form does not always fit into the equation alongside streams on Hulu, iTunes or Amazon downloads, a few hours of video games, a Facebook game and an illegal stream of the latest blockbuster film. With attention diverted away from traditional viewership and the extreme fragmentation of audiences, the television networks have faced a challenging road trying to combat these issues. The broadcast networks have had to answer big questions such as “Why would anyone spend time watching your network for one program they like when they can stream it later online and/or watch some niche cable network that has multiple programs they like?” and “Why should anyone watch your more family-friendly content when we can get apparently ‘riskier’ programming on cable?” Unfortunately, not all broadcast networks have figured out how to answer these questions. NBC, once the most popular and well-respected network in American television, has been in shambles for a decade due to consistent mismanagement and poor decision-making. ABC, FOX and CBS have had much more success in the early portions of the 21st century, but one could argue that ABC and FOX in particular have relied on the major successes of a few programs (Lost, Desperate Housewives, Grey’s Anatomy and Modern Family on ABC, American Idol, 24, House and Glee on FOX) to pull them through the darker times. Meanwhile, CBS has succeeded in a way that could be described only as “appealing to ‘old’ people,” wherein the “Eyeball Network” continues to churn out police and
legal procedurals and multi-camera sitcoms with broad appeal that are loved by older folks and those in the heartland.  

But despite the critical disdain for CBS’ programming or the jokes about its audience, CBS has shown one of the primary ways that networks can survive in today’s television landscape: branding. Branding is a particularly vague and loaded term that will be interrogated in later chapters, but for the purposes of this introduction, by branding, I mean the ways in which a television network creates an image and reputation for itself and its content, through marketing strategies, programming or any other extratextual spaces, to audiences at home or online.

Although CBS does not have a particularly potent or creative slogan – as of June 2011, it is still “Only CBS” with regular reference to “America’s Most Watched Network” – the network has conditioned television viewers to know what to expect from their content. Fans might call it something such as “simple, easy-to-digest and clear-cut” whereas critics might call it something such as “too simplistic, unintelligent and broad,” but the point is that most regular viewers and critics know exactly what kind of programming CBS provides. On cable, the use of branding is even more creative and diverse. The branding of many super-niche networks is particularly easy to identify, whether by a quick skimming of content or even an acknowledgement of the network’s name. Examples such as HGTV, BET, Food Network, Style The Game Show Network, The Golf Channel, and E! come to mind. Others, such as ESPN and MTV, are both old and popular enough that most viewers understand the network’s content coverage without the assistance of a more specific name. But for the larger cable networks that provide more generalized content such as TNT, TBS and USA Network, branding is just as important as it is for ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX.
Branding not only connects a network’s programming under one carefully-crafted theme or umbrella, it also helps them stand out among the hundreds of other choices. In the post-network era, all networks and channels are on a more level playing field competing for viewer attention and in recent years, branding has become one of the most noticeable ways networks attempt to differentiate themselves from everyone else. Network branding is certainly not a new or recent development. Most cable networks are inherently branded, either by name (again recall the Food Network or The Golf Channel) or content (CNN, ESPN). Broadcast network examples are tougher to identify, but certain network eras (such as CBS’s 1960s rural sitcom run) or scheduling practices (such as NBC’s “Must-See TV” Thursdays that began in the 1980s) represent past branding attempts. But in recent years, branding has become both more important and more prevalent, especially for the networks that provide more general, broad content. It is easy to expect what HGTV has to offer, but less so for broadcast networks like ABC and FOX or cable networks like TNT and TBS. All networks are moving towards a model that establishes a through-line between all programming, with the hopes of filling a very specific niche. When viewers access a network’s content from numerous devices, it is crucial for the media producers that the “experience” remains the same. FOX wants everything FOX-related to look and feel the same to viewers, inherently “FOX-like.” Therefore, focusing on network branding is a crucial step in exploring what it means to produce, distribute and promote television content in the 21st century post-network era.

It is my hope that focusing on USA Network will provide a successful entry point into recent developments in the television industry. USA Network is a particularly compelling case because its branding extends so wide and so deep. Although there are other contemporary examples of obvious, detailed branding among popular or well-respected networks (such as
HBO’s “It’s not TV. It’s HBO.” or Sci-Fi’s rebrand to Syfy⁸, no brand image extends to and connects with the specifics of the programming quite like that of USA Network. However, despite USA Network’s special position, it is still representative of many of the industry trends that could reshape how networks operate in the future. USA Network has succeeded not only because of its programming, but also through promotional materials, social media and scheduling. What initially appeared to be a fun marketing campaign to bring various series’ lead Characters together has now blossomed to a larger branding campaign that extends further than a few short commercials. “Characters Welcome” is an all-encompassing mantra for USA Network’s program development strategies as well. Every one of USA Network’s original scripted series is structurally, thematically and aesthetically similar, from Character type to story content to setting location. Therefore, USA Network has succeeded so well that “Characters Welcome” now evokes more than creative advertising or loosely-connected formulas; USA Network is something more, like its own generic category. And like all genres, the “USA Network genre” has its own conventions, inventions and overall “meanings,” all of which I will explore in later chapters.

**A brief history of USA Network**

Of course, USA Network was not always as successful, either with its branding or its programming, as it is today. Though the cable network aired original programming such as *Le Femme Nikita* (1997-2001) at various points during its first 30 years on the air, it was mostly known for reruns of syndicated series like *America’s Funniest Home Videos* and its relationship with the World Wrestling Federation (now World Wrestling Entertainment). Before the beginning of the 21st century, USA Network was not known for its quality original scripted programming and lacked an overall identity that viewers could recognize. In fact, a 2005 *TV*
Week article noted that USA Network had not employed any sort of overarching brand strategy since 1980.9

Things at USA Network started to shift in 2002, when the cable network debuted two new original series, both of which featured quirky but haunted men who solved mysteries with their unique talents: Monk (2002-10) and The Dead Zone (2002-07). Though Monk was more critically acclaimed, both series were well-regarded enough that USA Network was convinced to expand its stable of scripted programming. In the first few years after the debut of Monk and Dead Zone, USA Network aired a number of scripted series and miniseries. However, only The 4400 (2004-07) lasted more than season, while other forays into somewhat darker fare like Touching Evil (2004) and a Kojak remake/reimagining (2005) were quickly discarded after only one season and have been acknowledged as failures for “straying too far from [USA Network’s] ‘blue sky’ formula.”10 In 2005, after these missteps, USA Network executives hatched the branding campaign it still employs to this day: “Characters Welcome.”11 At the time, Bonnie Hammer trumpeted the new, $8 million dollar12 branding campaign in the press release announcing the move:

“We didn’t want to tack on a meaningless tagline or claim an arbitrary niche or demo. I believe we’ve succeeded in developing a campaign that’s organic to USA, something that captures and communicates what the network is about, what lives and breathes on its air…Whether it’s an obsessive compulsive detective like Monk, the tormented returnees of The 4400 or a real-life action hero from the WWE, it’s the compelling, sometimes complicated, often funny characters that make USA Network what it is.”13
The “blue skies” of the “Characters Welcome” campaign helped USA Network become one of the most powerful players on basic cable. Starting with the lead Characters from *Monk* and *The Dead Zone*, the branding campaign put the quirky folks that make up the worlds of USA Network’s series together in various short, off-beat commercials. These commercials, which will be discussed in detail later in the project, are almost always presented in a humorous, light tone and oftentimes disregard the plots of the respective series the Characters come from. Instead, USA Network leaves the audience with one major notion: their series feature slightly off-center, but immensely likable and easy relatable Characters. Though the settings and Characters highlighted have changed since that initial 2005 commercial, the framework of the “Characters Welcome” ads has stayed the same. And when the respective series are marketed individually, they still tend to follow a standardized format. This template usually includes glamour shots of cast members against a sun-drenched backdrop, but rarely includes concrete plot details that would give new viewers an indication about the story. Finally, the series themselves back up these ideals, as each one takes place in a warm or beautiful locale, features idiosyncratic, moderately outlaw-like Characters and provides relatively close-ended procedural stories that offer enough excitement to fill the weekly running time.

Without question, USA Network’s branding campaign has been an overwhelming success. Aside from the previously-mentioned *Kojak* remake (which was developed slightly before the branding campaign began), every USA Network series introduced after the “Characters Welcome” campaign began has been a success. The following list of series have been effectively introduced and sustained since the 2005 debut of the “Characters Welcome” slogan (as of January 2012): *Psych* (2006-), *Burn Notice* (2007-), *In Plain Sight* (2008-), *Royal Pains* (2009-), *White Collar* (2009-), *Covert Affairs* (2010-) and *Fairly Legal* (2011-).
are two slight exceptions to this rule, with caveats that separate them slightly from the network’s overall development plans. First, in 2007 USA Network made an agreement with NBCU partner NBC to share the ownership and viewing rights of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (2001-07 on NBC, 2007-11 on USA Network).\(^{16}\) The series did very well for USA Network since 2007 and only left the air in early 2011 because of actor departures.\(^{17}\) Second, after miniseries *The Starter Wife* drew sizable ratings and awards season buzz in 2007, USA Network ordered an additional 10 episodes, making it an actual series.\(^{18}\) After that 10-episode run in 2008, *The Starter Wife* series was cancelled, making it the one cancellation of a series that aired in the “Characters Welcome” era.\(^{19}\) However, because it originally started as a miniseries, *The Starter Wife* is more of an outlier of the overall programming stable and branding approach.

It is also important to mention USA Network’s scheduling strategies and how they have played into the brand image as well. Like most cable outlets trying to take advantage of the broadcast network “offseason” in the summer months, USA Network started airing its original content in June, July and August. *Monk* and *The Dead Zone* successfully debuted in the summer and all subsequent series from 2006-2008 also unspooled their first new episodes during that time period. By matching its scheduling with the branding campaign’s emphasis on blue skies, warm locations and escapist fare, USA Network has linked itself to the summer season. The network’s seasonal scheduling method has been so effective that USA Network has had no trouble then transferring it – and associating the feelings of summer and escapism – to the fall and winter months so that 2009’s *White Collar* and 2011’s *Fairly Legal* actually started in the fall and mid-winter respectively against full broadcast competition.

Seven years after the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign was introduced, USA Network is completely transformed. Although it was always a relatively well-known cable
network, USA Network is now the most popular basic cable force, winning the all-important rating wars on cable for five years straight.\textsuperscript{20} When NBCU was purchased by Comcast in early 2011, Comcast executives said that “Financially, it’s [USA Network] the most important property NBC Universal has.”\textsuperscript{21} And as I will argue throughout my thesis, USA Network has gained all these viewers and industry accolades by creating an interesting hybrid of branding, formula and genre. This hybrid produces complicated consequences for critics, audiences, the series themselves and likely the entire television industry. USA Network’s strategy appears to be not only one of the most successful branding campaigns – which is worthy of analysis in its own right – but also one of the most successful connections between branding and scripted programming. In a world of segmented audiences, USA Network is able to provide broad, yet narrowed content to a very sizable audience (relative to today’s ratings standards). Thus, it seems important to examine USA Network to see what its work means for both other cable networks but also for television as a whole.

My thesis will explore a number of USA Network’s branding initiatives and analyze many of the series themselves. I will be evaluating a number of the “Characters Welcome” television commercials and print advertisements, but also taking a look at the other, perhaps less obvious places where USA Network furthers its brand/genre image such as the series-specific web sites, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages and specials events such as the Character Approved Awards and the “Characters Unite” charity campaign. These are all non-programming spaces through which USA Network successfully extends the touchstones of the programming in such a way that there is great tonal, visual and thematic connection between programming and promotions. Everything from USA Network is united perfectly under the “Characters Welcome” umbrella, one that emphasizes and commodifies ideas of escapism, summer and inclusivity.
The primary crux of my thesis involves identifying the ways in which USA Network’s content, from the promotions to the actual scripted programming, has become a separate, new generic category that is both perpetuated by USA Network itself and acknowledged by critics and viewers. To accomplish these goals, I will be using the work of a number of different scholars who have tackled issues of formula and genre. John Cawelti’s groundbreaking work on formula will be tantamount to my discussion of USA Network’s programming formula. Cawelti also provides useful insights into the distinctions between formula and genre. Defining genre is similarly tricky and therefore requires the use of multiple perspectives. I will be drawing from Rick Altman’s and Thomas Schatz’s work on genre in film, as well as Jane Feuer’s foundational work on genre studies within television.

Most prominently, however, my work falls in line with the work of television studies scholar Jason Mittell. Mittell’s book *Genre and Television* will provide the theoretical groundwork for this project. In his book, Mittell chooses to move away from the textual analysis of generic categories and instead suggest we focus on the discourse surrounding television genres as the site for generic creation. He argues that textual analysis alone cannot bring us to a closer definition of genre because “genre” is not inherent within any individual text. The textual sum of one television series does not automatically make it part of a specific genre. Mittell sees genres as constructed “cultural categories” that are formed more through the intertextual than the textual. In this formation of genre, the intertextual is made up of how genre “operate(s) within the practices of critics, audiences, and industries.” This concept de-emphasizes both stringent textual analysis and overbearing ideological analysis that suggests only the media industry gets to determine what “genre” is and how it is delivered to audiences. Mittell’s three-pronged approach to genre creation in the intertext will serve as a catalyst for my analysis of USA
Network. Using his work, I will analyze how USA Network’s content has been activated into a generic category through industrial work (in this case, USA Network’s branding) and critical and audience response.

In chapter one, I will explore some of the broader distinctions between the concepts of formula and genre. Formula and genre have been discussed in-detail across multiple disciplines and it is pertinent to sketch out the idiosyncrasies between them before settling on how I will use those concepts in relationship to USA Network and its content. This chapter will identify how USA Network programming exists as a formula and introduce the ways in which the discourse surrounding that programming formula helps activate it into the USA Network generic category that emphasizes ideas of escapism, inclusiveness sunshine and summer.

Chapter two will focus on the complicated term of “branding” and its relationship to Mittell’s concept of genre as discursive, cultural categories. This chapter will explore branding’s place within the television industry, particularly on cable, over the past 15-20 years. The chapter will also discuss how USA Network’s strategies fit the definitions of branding and consider how the development of a strong brand can be viewed as a form of authorship.

Chapter three will focus on the first of three primary agents of discursive genre-activation: the industry. For USA Network, this means the organization of all its content, from branding materials to scripted programming, under the “Characters Welcome” brand. The chapter will focus on the various “Characters Welcome” products of the branding campaign from the last seven years and discuss how the campaign continues to accentuate the summertime feel, inclusiveness and escapist mentality.

Chapter four will highlight the second and third groups that play a role in shaping generic categories: critics and viewers. This section of the project will explore critical and viewer
response to USA Network series since the creation of the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign, as well as reactions to the branding campaign itself. This will not involve in-depth ethnographic research, but instead focus on critic reviews and discussion from viewers on those reviews.

Chapter five will transition into a discussion of the textual elements of the “USA Network genre.” This analysis will further the groundwork laid in chapter one about the trends within USA Network programming. In this chapter, I will focus on the construction of the Characters that power each of USA Network’s programs. This chapter will explore how USA Network’s Characters reflect official and outlaw hero ideas and how these Characters accentuate escapism and inclusiveness.

Chapter six will continue the textual analysis of the USA Network generic category and focus on the construction of episodic, season- and series-long narrative stories, beats and arcs within USA Network series. This chapter will also explore how this narrative construction also connects to the overall brand image themes related to escapism, inclusiveness and summertime.

The conclusion will consider the implications of this genre creation and also explore the impact of its relationship with commodification. This conclusion will discuss the impact of a relationship between commerce and art and explore the possible dangers to what USA Network has accomplished with its programing formula and branding campaign in recent years. Finally, it will explore what sort of blueprint, if any, USA Network has provided for other networks or the entire television industry.

Recent television scholarship has focused on complex, “quality” series like *Lost*, *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, * Arrested Development*, etc., but rarely is attention paid to the more mainstream fare that USA Network provides. Furthermore, scholarship generally invests attention to textual
elements (narrative complexity, storytelling, etc.) or larger cultural issues (race, gender and class). USA Network is one of the most popular television networks in the United States and yet, very little has been written about it, especially in regard to branding campaigns. Analyzing USA Network means not only filling a void ignored by recent scholarship on 21st century television, but also means pointing out how the branding and programming strategies of USA Network are representative of larger trends within the television industry. USA Network is not unlike other basic cable networks (such as TNT and NBCU partner Syfy) that are succeeding in an era when cable continues to erode the audiences that once belonged to broadcast networks. However, as the most successful basic cable network, one that regularly defeats its broadcast conglomerate cousin NBC in the Nielsen ratings, USA Network serves as an important case study for what is happening in television today, particularly for the complicated relationship between promotions and programming. The following chapters will explore how USA Network complicates the already messy distinctions between formula and genre through the commodification of certain values through a well-constructed brand image and a similarly-constructed group of programs.

NOTES

6 NBC’s issues have been well-documented by the entertainment media. For a few examples of this see Tim Arango, “NBC’s Slide to Troubled Nightly Punch Line,” New York Times, 16 January 2010,
David Goetzl, “Zucker Weighs In On Leno, NBC’s Future,” Media Post, 18 March 2009,

8 Stuart Elliot, “SciFi Channel Has a New Name: Now, It’s Syfy,” New York Times, 15 March 2009,
9 James Hibberd, “Building Character: USA Network will spend $8 million-plus to launch a branding campaign around the concept ‘Characters Welcome’,” TV Week, 9 May 2005: P1.
10 Scott Collins, “USA Cable Under Blue Skies,” Los Angeles Times, 20 July 2009,
11 Hibberd, “Building Character: USA Network will spend $8 million-plus to launch a branding campaign around the concept ‘Characters Welcome’.”
12 Hibberd, “Building Character: USA Network will spend $8 million-plus to launch a branding campaign around the concept ‘Characters Welcome’.”
13 “Characters Welcome at USA!” Press Release, The Futon Critic, 23 June 2005,
14 “Characters Welcome at USA!” Press Release.
15 USA Network debuted two new series, Suits and Necessary Roughness, in the summer of 2011 while this project was in progress. Due to time constraints, those two series are not included in this project, but both were also renewed for second seasons that will air sometime in mid-2012.
16 Nellie Andreeva, “USA renews ‘Law & Order: Criminal Intent’,” Reuters, 23 May 2008,
17 Stuart Levine, “‘Law & Order: CI’ returns to USA,” Variety, 22 September 2010,
http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118024461?refCatId=14 (5 February 2012).
18 Josef Adalian, “‘Starter Wife’ evolves at USA,” Variety, 16 October 2007,
19 Daniel Frankel, “USA’s leaving ‘Wife’,” Variety, 12 February 2009,
20 John Sellers, “USA Dominates Cable Ratings Race – Again,” The Wrap, 29 March 2011,
21 Amy Chozick, “The Happy-Time Network,” Wall Street Journal, 22 April 2011,
23 USA Network brands its unscripted programming such as WWE Raw and its reruns of NCIS, House and more with the “Characters Welcome” slogan/aesthetic markers as well. However, those methods will not be discussed, as I have chosen to stick with original scripted programming.
24 Robert Seidman, "USA Continues Summer Domination at #1," TV by the Numbers, 10 August 2010,
CHAPTER I. STRUCTURAL PATTERNS AND CULTURAL MEANINGS: EXPLORING FORMULA AND GENRE

Before identifying how USA Network’s programming fits definitions of both formula and genre, it is imperative to discuss the discrepancies between those two concepts and how they will be used throughout this project. Identifying the differences between formula and genre has long been a point of interest for scholars, as so many texts tend to combine traditional elements of multiple genres to their storytelling approaches. In hopes of unpacking the variances between formula and genre and applying those distinctions to USA Network’s series and brand image, it is simplest to tackle one idea at a time. Therefore, I will first discuss past scholarship on formula and try to determine exactly what elements make up USA Network’s programming formula. I will then move on to discussions of television genre and how various concepts related to genre are represented by USA Network and its branding strategy. Hopefully this approach will make it easier to see both how formula and genre relate to one another, and also how they work together in this specific case of USA Network. Although the lines of dissimilarity between formula and genre are very slim, describing how USA Network fits the definitions of both will shine a light on those important distinctions.

Unwrapping distinctions: Formula

One of best-regarded concepts of formula comes from John G. Cawelti, a scholar who has been work to define both formula and genre for more than 30 years. Cawelti’s 1969 article “The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Culture” and 1970 book on the formula in the western *The Six Gun Mystique* have served as seminal works on the topic ever since their release. According to Cawelti’s initial model of formula, every cultural product is made up of conventions and inventions. He noted that conventions are “elements which are known to both the creator and his audience beforehand.”¹ This includes elements such as general plots, standard
character types and commonly known narrative devices, structures and more. Inventions are “elements which are uniquely imagined by the creator” including newer, unseen characters, plots and devices. For Cawelti, convention and invention exist on the opposite sides of a continuum. The dynamic between these two elements helps create the formula of every story, but Cawelti posits that convention and invention are important to stories for different reasons. Conventions assist in providing an audience and the culture as a whole with stability; meanwhile, inventions present us with images and narratives full of new information. Finally, and most importantly for Cawelti, is the fact that the conventions and inventions represent a specific reflection of the culture or psychological value to the audience. These needs and desires can be of the unconscious and repressed variety. He suggests that formulas are always tied to the time period in which they originate because they represent or provide something particular to that specific culture at that specific time. Combining all of these ideas together brings us to Cawelti’s overarching definition of formula from 1969-1970: The combination of the conventions and inventions found in plot, character, settings and narrative working in tandem to produce and reflect particular values that come to be associated with those elements of plot, character, setting and narrative.  

Furthermore, Cawelti’s concept of formula is powered by additional concepts we see elsewhere in popular culture. These include ritual, game and dream. Cawelti notes that formulas are ritualistic because they are almost like “spectator sports,” in that the mass audience can come together in their participation of formulaic entertainment “with rules that are known to everyone.” He argues that formulas can exist as games for two reasons. First, both games and formulas create a “patterned experience of excitement, suspense and release.” Secondly, both games and formulas create circumstances for “ego enhancement through the temporary
resolution of inescapable frustrations and tensions through fantasy.” Therefore, both the game and the ritual parts of formula allow the audience member to escape into a predictable world where the good guys catch the bad guys and it is okay to forget about the problems of “the real world.” The dream elements of formula are, according to Cawelti, more difficult to determine. He defines these dream elements in relation to formula as such:

“[F]ormula stories seem to be one way in which the individuals in a culture act our certain unconscious or repressed needs or express in an overt an symbolic fashion certain latent motives that they must give expression to but cannot face openly.”

Cawelti notes that using psychoanalytic analysis to determine latent or unconscious beliefs is dangerous and problematic, but suggests that the formula’s ability to embody larger meanings is important enough that this kind of analysis is worthwhile. The ritual, game and dream elements are not paramount to my discussion of USA Network’s programming formula, but I think it is important to make note of their existences, since they inform Cawelti’s argument that formulas reflect, and perhaps create, larger meanings and values for those who consume them.

However, what makes Cawelti’s work on formula (and genre) so compelling is that he has continued to interrogate his own arguments over time. In the first chapter of his 1976 book *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, Cawelti simplifies his definition of formulas and focuses a bit more on their cultural value. He calls formulas “a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype” and suggests that they play a crucial role in ways in which stereotypes are embedded into culture. He also posits that using formulas is a means of generalizing large groups of texts to create story and character patterns, making formula more a tool of analysis than an exact science of any kind. Then in
2002, Cawelti returned to his past discussion of formula yet again. In “Formula and Genres Revisited,” he expresses frustration over his original use of convention and invention and how those terms perhaps evoke taste hierarchies (invention being representative of “high art,” for example). Yet, after a bit of searching, Cawelti decides that convention exist in all forms of art, no matter the perceived value, and notes that formula is still a useful way to view popular culture texts. Despite Cawelti’s consistent tinkering with his own arguments, I think many of his points about formula remain the same. Ultimately, he views formula as a collection of conventions (with occasional inventions, disassociated from high/low art distinctions) that come together to reflect larger cultural values, concerns or stereotypes.

There are dangers in Cawelti’s ideas of formula, many of which are noted by David Feldman’s “Formalism and Popular Culture.” Feldman is concerned with Cawelti’s assertion that popular culture texts are more “collective” than fine art texts. He also believes that studying conventions is less useful than Cawelti asserts that it is. Instead, Feldman argues for the studying of inventions, or as he calls them, innovations, in hopes of determining why audiences like one popular culture text over another. His goal is to use a more Formalist dialogue (with terms such as bounded and free motif) in the exploration of innovations and their popularity. However, I only see one portion of Feldman’s critique of Cawelti useful. Feldman argues that it is not only the conventions and inventions that help reflect audience need or desire; it is the arrangement of those elements. He sees story elements like plot, setting or character as less important when compared to how said story elements are organized. Feldman notes that it could be dangerous and reductionist to isolate arrangement from the content of formal conventions, but I intend not to do that. However, I instead want to include arrangement as an additional element in my concept of USA Network’s programming formula. With the inclusion of arrangement, there are
four major elements to my working definition of formula: conventions, inventions, arrangement and overall value.

**USA Network’s programming formula**

I will now follow Cawelti’s lead from his work on the western in *The Six Gun Mystique* and lay out the different formulaic elements (conventions, inventions, value and arrangement) in USA Network’s overarching formula, before moving on to the specific examples of these concepts in each of the network’s series. Again, the series I will be discussing in the following pages are those that have made up USA Network’s stable of original programming in the “Characters Welcome” era that began in 2005: *Monk, Dead Zone, Psych, Burn Notice, In Plain Sight, Royal Pains, White Collar, Covert Affairs* and *Fairly Legal*. This discussion does not include *The Starter Wife* and *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (because of their unique circumstances within USA Network’s programming history as a mini-series and a transplant from NBC, respectively), reruns or unscripted programming like *WWE Raw*. It also does not include two series that debuted on USA Network in the summer of 2011, *Suits* and *Necessary Roughness*. This exploration of the USA Network programming formula is not meant to be fully expansive and descriptive, but should serve as solid introduction to the formula.

Let us begin with Characters (again, capitalized to accentuate their specific traits). The lead Characters in each USA Network series of the “Characters Welcome” era (including *Monk* and *The Dead Zone*) all share similar traits. They are all idiosyncratic individuals with a very specific skill who walk their own kind of path. That path often crosses with authority figures, usually law enforcement. And although the lead Characters usually ends up helping said authorities, they never follow that authority’s rules. The authority figures tend to put up with these difficult Characters because their specific skill allows them to solve cases or help people in
such a way that it is not worth asking the Character to change. These authority figures are usually traditionally “tough” or “by-the-book” on the surface, but frequently give in to the Character’s whims in hopes of solving the case. The Character is always supported by a friend or two, individuals who certainly understand the Character’s distinctive perspective and are willing to help solve the problems with them, but they are often not as skilled or eccentric as the Character. These supporting players serve as the middle people between the Character and the authority figures. In some series, the supporting players work for the authority, but are still helpful and friendly to the Character. The cast of these series is then filled out with a member of the Character’s family, who provides both moral support and tough love. This is usually a parent, but recent inventions have presented siblings or makeshift parents who, while not related to the lead by blood, still fill a similar role.

The setting for each of these series follows a similar formulaic pattern. The lead Character typically lives in a warm, sunny location, one that can be continuously used in transition and establishing shots in hopes of accentuating the series’ relationship to escapism and summer. These are usually thought of as vacation destinations, or at least beautiful places that those watching at home might want to visit. In the instances where these USA Network series do not take place in a traditionally warm locale, the settings still have distinctive skylines or architecture that look very good when drenched in sun and blue skies. No matter the setting, each one emphasizes escape and sunshine. Furthermore, each USA Network series makes sure to forefront its location by building plots around it. Thus, if the series takes place near an ocean, the lead Characters are almost always around an ocean. If it takes place in a major city, the Characters are typically walking the streets with the landmarks surrounding them.
The formula of these series includes basic similarities in plot points, narrative arcs and also in the arrangement of these elements. Across a full-season or series, the Characters attempt to solve a longstanding mystery or problem. It can be the murder of a loved one, finding someone who betrayed them or uncovering a major secret. Almost always, the Characters solve one aspect of the ongoing problem/mystery each season (or half-season), but something new always pops up to derail them from reaching their final goal. On an episode-to-episode basis, the overarching plot is addressed only in the first and last 2-5 minutes, unless it is the first or last episode of the season. Therefore, the bulk of USA Network series’ episodes are filled with close-ended procedural cases that distract the Characters from pursuing the overarching mystery. In many instances, the Characters feel obligated to get involved in these cases because they want to help people. Sometimes these cases are personal for the Character (i.e. a family member gets kidnapped), but most of the time, they are focused on random strangers looking for help. In terms of narrative structure, the episodes follow a rarely-varied formula. At first, the Character is worried about the overarching problem. But after a few minutes, an event happens so that he or she has to step away from it and help someone in need. The Character then meets up with the client or victim and hears about the crime or wrongdoing secondhand and subsequently tries to solve the problem. Throughout the episode, the Character thinks he or she have solved the problem, but then another issue arises and he or she has to think on his or her feet and display his or her exceptional skills. Often, this also involves the Character and his or her supporting friends going undercover or taking on new personas. Along the way, the Characters conflict with the authority figures over how to approach the issue. Eventually, the Character uses his or her skills to solve the problem, just narrowly saving the day while cracking wise and avoiding much harm. After a thank you from the client or victim and maybe a lecture from the authority figure, the
Character goes back to his or her principal quest, only to be stumped yet again. While the cases themselves vary from week-to-week so as to not seem completely derivative (i.e. a hostage situation one week, a murder the next week), rarely do USA Network series deviate from the narrative arrangement discussed above. I will further explore the construction of season- and series-long narratives in chapter six.

I would now like to discuss each USA Network series and how it fits into these concepts of the USA Network formula. However, to avoid tediously describing how each series fits the Character, setting and plot/narrative conventions or inventions, it seems easier and clearer to place all this information together in a table. Therefore, below you will find said chart of each USA Network series introduced in the “Characters Welcome” era, excluding previously-mentioned exceptions like The Starter Wife, Law & Order: Criminal Intent, Suits and Necessary Roughness. Bolded text indicates what I view as an invention of USA Network’s formula.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Plot/Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monk</td>
<td><strong>Lead Character</strong>: Adrian Monk</td>
<td>Former homicide</td>
<td>Local law enforcement</td>
<td>San Francisco, CA</td>
<td><strong>Weekly plots</strong>: Murders&lt;br&gt;<strong>Overarching plot</strong>: Solving the murder of Monk’s wife</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Supporting characters</strong>: Sharona Fleming, Natalie Teeger, Randy Disher</td>
<td>detective, now</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Authority</strong>: Francis Stottlemeyer</td>
<td>consultant</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Family</strong>: Dr. Charles Kroger (not blood relation, serves as Monk’s psychiatrist)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Dead Zone</td>
<td><strong>Lead Character</strong>: Johnny Smith</td>
<td><strong>Psychic Detective</strong>&lt;br&gt;(outlier, only “supernatural” ability – before CW era)</td>
<td>Local law enforcement</td>
<td>Generic small town</td>
<td><strong>Weekly plots</strong>: Solving crimes based on past/future visions&lt;br&gt;<strong>Overarching plots</strong>: Possible apocalypse on the horizon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Supporting characters</strong>: Sarah Bannerman (former love interest), Bruce Lewis</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Authority</strong>: Sherriff Walter Bannerman</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family:</strong> JJ Bannerman-Smith (son)</td>
<td><strong>Psych</strong></td>
<td><strong>Burn Notice</strong></td>
<td><strong>In Plain Sight</strong></td>
<td><strong>White Collar</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lead Character:</strong> Shawn Spencer</td>
<td><strong>Fake psychic</strong></td>
<td><strong>“Burned” (fired) spy</strong></td>
<td><strong>U.S. Marshall</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ex-thief/con, assistant to the FBI</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Supporting characters:</strong> Burton Guster, Juliet O’Hara (also part of the authority/love interest)</td>
<td>Santa Barbara, CA</td>
<td></td>
<td>Various governmental agencies, WITSEC</td>
<td>FBI, local law enforcement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Authority:</strong> Detective Lassiter, Chief Vick</td>
<td><strong>Weekly plots:</strong> Murders, robberies, etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>New York, NY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family:</strong> Henry Spencer (father)</td>
<td><strong>Overarching plots:</strong> Yin/Yang Killers; Shawn and Juliet’s romantic relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Weekly plots:</strong> Catching white collar criminals; art thieves, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Burn Notice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lead Character:</strong> Michael Westen</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Overarching plots:</strong> Determining who burned Michael; Michael and Fiona’s relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Overarching plots:</strong> Finding who kidnapped and killed Neal’s old girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supporting characters:</strong> Sam Axe, Fiona Glenanne (also love interest)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>White Collar</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Authority:</strong> Rotating cast of guest stars</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Lead Character:</strong> Neal Caffrey</td>
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<td><strong>Family:</strong> Madeline Westen (mother)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Supporting characters:</strong> Mozzie, Alex (possible love interest)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Authority:</strong> Peter Burke, Clinton Jones and Dianna Barrigan (all FBI agents, but are more supportive than)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Show</td>
<td>Lead Character</td>
<td>Supporting characters</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Weekly plots</td>
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<tr>
<td>Royal Pains</td>
<td>Hank Lawson</td>
<td>Jill Casey (also love interest), Divya Katdare</td>
<td>Beleaguered ER doctor</td>
<td>General lack of authority figures, but father issues</td>
<td>The Hamptons; Solving medical emergencies in the Hamptons; Trying to open a free clinic; Hank and Jill’s romantic relationship</td>
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<td>Covert Affairs</td>
<td>Annie Walker</td>
<td>Auggie Anderson, Ben Mercer (ex-love interest) and Jai Wilcox (possible love interest)</td>
<td>CIA Directors Joan and Arthur Campbell</td>
<td>No overarching authority</td>
<td>Various CIA missions: kidnappings, hostage situations, undercover ops; Discovering what happened to Ben Mercer, Annie’s ex and secret agent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fairly Legal</td>
<td>Kate Reed</td>
<td>Leonardo Price, Justin Patrick (love interest)</td>
<td>Lawyer-turned-mediator</td>
<td>Step-mother who is in charge of firm; judges</td>
<td>San Francisco, CA; Mediating cases, sometimes going to court; Discovering the truth about Kate’s recently-dead father</td>
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**Royal Pains**
- *Lead Character:* Hank Lawson
- *Supporting characters:* Jill Casey (also love interest), Divya Katdare
- *Authority:* No overarching authority
- *Family:* Evan Lawson (brother) and Eddie Lawson (father); father is more antagonistic than other USA Network parents

**Covert Affairs**
- *Lead Character:* Annie Walker
- *Supporting characters:* Auggie Anderson, Ben Mercer (ex-love interest) and Jai Wilcox (possible love interest)
- *Authority:* CIA Directors Joan and Arthur Campbell
- *Family:* Danielle Brooks (sister)

**Fairly Legal**
- *Lead Character:* Kate Reed
- *Supporting characters:* Leonardo Price, Justin Patrick (love interest)
- *Authority:* Mediating firm boss Lauren Reed (also a quasi-family member: step-mom)
- *Family:* Spencer Reed (brother)
As you can see from this table, USA Network’s stable of series in the “Characters Welcome” era follow a fairly standard formula of conventions that includes a skilled, individualistic Character, supportive friends and family and a stringent authority that the Character often annoys while solving weekly problems and trying to crack a much longer, more personal issue. However, this table presents a few interesting developments and inventions as well. First, it is apparent that USA Network based its future series development on *Monk* and not *Dead Zone*. *Dead Zone* is much darker and includes a supernatural element to the Character’s skills that is not seen in any of the other series. The Character template used in *Monk* is seen throughout the rest of USA Network’s series, an unsurprising note considering *Monk* was a major success from the moment it debuted in 2002. Second, six of the nine series are led by male Characters, which is not surprising considering most television series feature that kind of gender bias. However, when we consider the changes or inventions to the USA Network formula, the three series with female leads (*In Plain Sight*, *Covert Affairs*, and *Fairly Legal*) do serve as slight innovations to the USA Network formula because of the gender of their Character. The change in the gender of the Character often means similar changes for the supporting characters as well (i.e. the primary supporting characters in *In Plain Sight*, *Covert Affairs* and *Fairly Legal* are mostly men). However, the female-fronted series see those Characters work in a more “official” capacity than their leading male counterparts. Whereas male Characters like *Burn Notice*’s Michael Westen work completely on their own or *Psych*’s Shawn Spencer work as annoying, problematic consultants for the police, the women work more directly for society’s law and order. *In Plain Sight*’s Mary is a U.S. Marshall, *Covert Affairs*’ Annie works for the CIA and *Fairly Legal*’s Kate is a mediator working for a high-profile firm. Each female Character still breaks the rules that bosses and institutions enforce, but it is interesting to see that the females
are locked in to more official jobs than the male Characters. This dichotomy between the male and female Characters will covered in more detail in chapter five.

The rest of the categories include some variation or invention, but often those changes appear to be minor tweaks that come along with making sure that audiences can tell the specific differences between the different series in a larger group. These kinds of changes can also keep the USA Network formula appearing stale. *White Collar* mixes up the supporting and authority characters, by having individuals that fill both roles. FBI agent Peter Burke is Neal Caffrey’s primary contact and friend, but he is also his boss and they often butt heads. Other series, such as *Royal Pains*, lack the antagonistic authority figure. Moreover, after developing a number of series that focused on a Character who solved crimes, USA Network has clearly made an effort to tinker with the formula to include different professions for the lead Character. Two of the last three series on this chart (*Royal Pains, Fairly Legal*) step outside the crime-solving realm, and so do the two series that debuted in the summer of 2011 (*Suits, Necessary Roughness*). Most of the other crucial elements of the formula still exist in newer series, but the change in profession presents the appearance of variation (perhaps more so than there actually is).

Each series takes place in a new location; however, every setting connects back to the “blue skies” ideal by highlighting good (read: warm) weather and “destination” cities. In the two slightly tweaked cases (*White Collar’s* New York City and *Covert Affairs’* Washington D.C.), the glamorous portions of the settings are celebrated through transition and establishing shots, just like all USA Network series. Although New York and Washington, D.C. are not immediately thought of as warm getaway spots like Florida, New Mexico, California or The Hamptons, they are still considered worthwhile locations to visit and the series and USA Network makes sure to emphasize the more stylish parts with smart filming strategies. The
The diegetic world of *White Collar* stresses the beauty of New York City’s downtown architecture and landscapes. *Covert Affairs* takes a similar approach with Washington D.C. and also sends its Character to glamorous foreign locales (through green-screen and location swapping, mostly) as well. It also appears that shooting takes place during warmer months so the Characters in *White Collar* and *Covert Affairs* are not wearing heavy coats or scarves and shivering in the New York and Washington D.C. winters. Relatedly, most of USA Network’s series share a similar technical convention in the wide location establishing and transition shot. These series emphasize the beauty of their locations in the beginning, middle and end of individual episodes with quickly-cut wide shots. Not an episode of *Burn Notice* goes by without a few wide shots of the Miami beaches and the beautiful women that populate them, and similar shots are found of The Hamptons, New York City, San Francisco and Santa Barbara in *Royal Pains, White Collar, Fairly Legal/Monk* and *Psych* respectfultly. This technical convention continues to promote the aesthetic value of the locations and also evokes thoughts of escapism.

As for the plotting and the narratives, each series has its own kind of case, whether it be the undercover work on *Covert Affairs*, witness protection stories on *In Plain Sight* or the medical emergencies on *Royal Pains*, but each series sticks within that specific template through most of its episodes. The cases are almost always introduced and solved in the same episode, aside from the occasional two-part episode that happens to deal with a case that ties directly into the Character’s personal life or quest. And, of course, these two-part episodes also happen to come at the end of the season as a way to build dramatic tension for a cliffhanger so that viewers will return the following season. Most of the series feature an ongoing romance between the lead Character and one of the supporting characters, a relationship powered by television’s classic “unresolved sexual tension” tactic wherein the couple obviously likes one another, but random
events keep them apart for a long time. Additionally, the relationship is often only addressed in the “big” episodes, like season premieres and finales. For example, even though they had discussed their feelings for one another way back in season two’s ninth episode, Shawn and Juliet just started dating in the episode 10 of Psych’s fifth season. And if there is not a relationship with unresolved sexual tension, it is often because the Character’s love interest is dead (Monk, White Collar). In these cases, the Characters are still driven by their love because they hope to solve their significant other’s murder.

When applying Cawelti’s formula and also considering Feldman’s discussion of arrangement, it is crucial to determine the overall physiological value that this formula (and the arrangement of its elements) presents to the audience. Both Cawelti and Feldman note that it is dangerous to assume what viewers take away from a popular culture text, but there are apparent assumptions that can be made based on what the texts provide and how the audience has reacted to them on a general level. I believe that we can look at what the texts themselves seem to be saying and then broadly judge how the audience has responded to that message based on external factors like Nielsen ratings and more. In the case of USA Network’s formula, it seems relatively clear that the viewers are responding to the message the network and its series are putting out there. Every one of the nine series mentioned above has or had great-to-solid ratings (again, relative to the standards of basic cable) and all have been renewed for multiple seasons. People are obviously watching and, whether explicitly or implicitly, taking in the message of USA Network’s formula.

What is that message? If we combine the peculiar, but skilled Characters, their relationship with authority and the beautiful vacation locales, it seems to me that USA Network’s formula is tapping into two alluring desires: escapism and inclusiveness. USA Network’s
formul provides the audience with a certain amount of escapism, both visually and narratively. Like almost all other television series, USA Network’s series feature a number of good-looking individuals framed in specific ways to heighten their best features. And because many of the series take place near bodies of water, there are regular opportunities to see beautiful people in little clothing. Again, the locations themselves are highlighted and presented in such a way that the audience is supposed to marvel at their beauty just as they do the Characters. Burn Notice brings viewers Miami, Royal Pains highlights the Hamptons and White Collar displays the gorgeous architecture of New York City. These aesthetic elements help the series serve as 42-minute postcards from vacation hotspots for the viewers, who perhaps cannot travel or would rather just enjoy these locales from the safety of their own homes. Whether the viewer is escaping into the blue water of the Atlantic Ocean and Miami nightlife on Burn Notice or the blue eyes of White Collar’s Matthew Bomer, he or she is easily transported to a different space and frame of mind when watching USA Network’s formula play out on the television.

Furthermore, the narratives themselves also emphasize ideas of escapism, as they present narratively coherent, close-ended stories with obvious lines drawn between “good” and “bad” – with the occasional explosion or chase sequence thrown in. In this respect, viewers do not have to spend much time worrying about whether or not they are going to lose the plot, they can instead get lost in the plot. Audiences can just sit back and watch an easy-to-follow case unfold in front of them with little concern. And because USA Network’s series only address overarching narrative questions at the very beginning and end of most episodes, there is little worry for the viewer about making sure he or she sees every single episode. Viewers can jump in and out of the story, across both episodes and seasons, with little trouble. By combining aesthetic
and narrative qualities that emphasize escapism, USA Network’s formula becomes widely accessible and appealing to viewers across multiple demographics.

If we consider how the word “character” can be used in other contexts, people might refer to someone who is a little odd as “a real character.” USA Network has grabbed hold of that idea and implemented it into its programming, and especially its brand image. The brand image will be discussed further in chapter three, but the point still needs to be made here that the audience not only likes to see slightly unique individuals just barely skirting by the law; they also like to believe that they personally are Characters who would fit right in with the people that populate USA Network’s various series. Therefore, watching distinctive people on television seemingly allows the viewers to feel like they are relating to someone who is like them – kind of weird, but also kind of special. And USA Network further encourages the audience to feel this way through its branding campaign. Ultimately, USA Network’s formula presents and accentuates our desire to support the off-beat hero, and also see the off-beat hero’s traits within ourselves.

**Unwrapping distinctions: Genre**

USA Network’s programming strategies in the “Characters Welcome” era have allowed it to create a specific kind of formula that has been applied across multiple series. But in an industry where hit series are hard to come by, it is far from original for a network to take one successful formula and use it over and over again. To establish a separate generic category, there must be something more than shared character types and similar narrative plots. This is particularly true in the television industry where various factors force almost every network to create new series that are closely related to reputable hits. Meaning, nearly every series on television employs standalone, procedural elements with some ongoing character and plot strands so that viewers can miss episodes and not feel confused. Obviously, audience
expectations and production improvements have changed over time so exceptionally different series like *Lost* and *The Office* can become television royalty or pay cable networks like HBO and Showtime can do whatever they want with little trouble. But most scripted television, especially on broadcast and basic cable, follows a similar formula. Thus, arguing that USA Network moves beyond that formula and into a separate generic category requires more defining and exploring.

In addition to his work in defining formula, John Cawelti also tackled genre and was particularly interested in how the two concepts worked together. And like his discussion of formula, Cawelti often reconsidered his thoughts on genre. In *The Six-Gun Mystique*, Cawelti briefly touches on the differences between formula and genre, noting that genre is “a structural pattern” while formula is based more on “cultural” narratives and materials. Then, in 1976’s “The Study of Literary Formulas,” Cawelti notes that he does not think “it makes a great deal of difference” if people use formula and genre interchangeable, so as long as they make explicit which they are using and why. He suggests that formula and genre work together as part of a complex process of literary analysis, wherein we first identify historical or cultural patterns within larger bodies of texts (formula) and then make aesthetic or artistic judgments based on how individual texts work within – or outside – those patterns (genre). Finally, Cawelti suggests that formulaic patterns exist for a certain period of time before critics and audiences start identifying and interpreting it as a genre. Although these statements suggest that Cawelti’s more updated concepts of genre and formula are still structuralist in nature, he later argues in yet another piece that formulas are developed within a “cultural matrix” that depends on changes in cultural values and patterns. He notes that genres are more universal, historical archetypes that
have less flexibility and dependency on cultural context, but if formulas ultimately become
genres, the latter category clearly has some connection to shifts in culture.\textsuperscript{16}

However, other scholars disagree with Cawelti’s initial definition of genre. In one of the
most recognized discussions of television and genre Jane Feuer notes that “film and television
[genres] \textit{are} culturally specific” (emphasis mine) and culturally constructed (something Cawelti
certainly came around to later).\textsuperscript{17} Feuer argues that genres “bring into play” three things: the
system of production, structural analysis of the text and the reception process (with audience
conceived as an interpretative community). She posits that there are three primary approaches to
genre: the aesthetic approach, the ritual approach and the ideological approach. Cawelti’s
discussion of conventions, inventions and structure serves as a solid example of the aesthetic
approach. Feuer identifies Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch’s reference to television as a
“cultural forum” as an example of the ritual approach. This method focuses on a genre as an
exchange of shared beliefs and values between the industry and the audience. Finally, the
ideological approach sees genre as an agent of control, wherein Hollywood can “reproduce the
dominant ideology of the capitalist system” and reinforce various dominant cultural ideologies.
This viewpoint de-emphasizes the audience’s perspective and reception of texts. Furthermore,
Feuer notes that many concepts of genre ignore the reception process by the audience and focus
too much on the “built-in tendency to structuralize.” Feuer argues that this is especially true in
television because of our preconceptions that all television is derivative and the same. For Feuer,
genres are made, not born. They do not exist automatically in the world, but instead exist as
“abstraction concepts.”\textsuperscript{18} There are a number of other approaches to genre that fall under Feuer’s
categories.
In his attempts to redefine genre for film studies Rick Altman presents a combination of the ritual and ideological approach, where genre “owes its success not alone to its reflection of an audience ideal, nor solely to its status as apology for the Hollywood enterprise, but to its ability to carry out both functions simultaneously.”¹⁹ In Altman’s perspective, the creation of genres limits the “free play” of signification by providing very specific contexts within which texts should be interpreted. He believes that Hollywood has figured out how to make genres relay specific ideologies from culture back to culture so that the public does not feel like it is totally being manipulated. This proposes that genre presents audience desires and uses them to slightly dictate how to react to those tastes. Altman complicates his construction of genre by integrating something of an aesthetic approach to it as well. He argues that genre can be defined by signs (characters, iconography) arranged into syntactic formulas and plots, together creating generic conventions.²⁰ Thomas Schatz argues something similar to Altman, noting that genre exists as a “formalized sign system whose rules have been assimilated (often unconsciously) through cultural consensus.” Schatz’s construction of genre distinguishes between the “film genre,” which is the overall system or grammar of that system, and the “genre film,” which is an individual instance or representation of that overall system. For Schatz, the film genre is a tacit contract between the industry and the audience, whereas the genre film serves as an individual event that honors that contract.²¹

The overlap and confusion between the statements from Cawelti, Feuer, Altman, Schatz and Newcomb and Hirsch exemplify the conversations scholars have been having for years in relation to genre. This is just a sample of what is a much larger and wide-ranging conversation. The aesthetic, ritual and ideological methods are all valuable and problematic in their own ways. There are elements of each tactic that would be helpful for analysis of USA Network’s
programming. The aesthetic approaches, like those perpetuated by Cawelti, are useful in identifying textual features but that kind of analysis fails to describe the differences between a formula and a genre. The ritual approach, such as Newcomb and Hirsch’s television as a cultural forum, fails to really consider the place of marketing, advertising and branding, a crucial aspect of my project. Similarly, the ideological approaches of Altman and Schatz are perhaps too focused on the place of industry and business in genre, at least in terms of the control Hollywood appears to have over the audience and reception. I would argue that while the television and film industries do play an integral part in creating and sustaining genres, they are not the sole players in that process. It is impossible to determine the exact amount of power each group holds, but I would suggest that audiences and critics do play a fairly integral role in the shaping of generic categories.

Therefore, my working concept of genre will come from television scholar Jason Mittell, whose recent book *Genre and Television* attempts to move beyond these complicated concepts of genre and formula. Mittell acknowledges the work of Feuer, Schatz and Altman by agreeing that genres are used to organize audiences, cultivate fan bases and make targeting easier to accomplish. However, he chooses to transition away from the textual, aesthetic analysis of genre distinctions and instead asks us to focus on the discourse surrounding texts. He argues that textual analysis alone cannot bring us to a closer definition of genre because “genre” is not inherent within any individual text. The textual sum of one television series does not automatically make it part of a specific genre. Like Feuer, Mittell sees genre as culturally constructed, but with more of a purpose. Mittell views genres as “cultural categories” that are formed more through the intertextual than the textual. In this formation of genre, the intertextual is made up of how genre “operate(s) within the practices of critics, audiences, and industries.”
These “practices” include anything from the texts themselves and the responses of audiences and critics to lesser-discussed processes such as scheduling, coverage within industry publications, advertising and more:

“Genres transect the boundaries between text and context, with production, distribution, promotion, exhibition, criticism, and reception practices all working to categorize media texts into genres… Even though genres do not emerge from core textual essences or structures, the use of generic categories is predicated on a cultural assumption that genres do in fact refer to internal textual features.”

Furthermore, he notes that “anyone who uses generic terms is participating in the constitution of genre categories.” This concept de-emphasizes both stringent aesthetic analysis and overbearing ideological analysis that suggests only the media industry gets to determine what “genre” is and how it is delivered to the people at home. In this viewpoint, genre is created not only from the top-down by the media industries and critics, but also from the bottom-up, by audiences. This serves as a more opened-ended version of the ideological approach discussed earlier.

Finally, to apply this more external approach to genre, Mittell pulls from Michel Foucault, Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott’s various discussions of the cultural facets of author function to describe the role of each group in genre discourse (his emphasis, not mine):

“We can break down the discursive practices that constitute genres into three basic types: definition (‘this show is a sitcom because it has a laugh track’), interpretation (‘sitcoms reflect and reinforce family values’), and evaluation (‘sitcoms are better entertainment than soap operas’). These discursive utterances, which may seem to reflect on an already established genre, are themselves
constitutive of that genre – they are the practices that define genres, delimit their meanings, and posit their cultural value.”

These three external, discursive practices serve as the primary catalysts for this project. Exploring the development of USA Network’s “Characters Welcome” branding campaign and the response to it from audiences and critics will show how USA Network’s programming formula has been defined, interpreted and evaluated as a distinctive generic category. If the slate of USA Network programming exists as a formula, then the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign activates the formula into something more like a genre. This generic category has been defined, interpreted and evaluated by audiences and critics alike. In this concept of genre, the aesthetic and textual features of the USA Network programming formula can carry over to the USA Network generic category, as they are not as integral in the activation from formula to genre. As Mittell suggests, it is the discursive practices that play the crucial role in this activation, which in this case, starts with the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign and the response to it. Therefore, I plan to discuss how USA Network uses branding to establish, in the discourse, its programming as a special generic category. Then, in chapter three, I will explore how audiences and critics interpret and evaluate both the branding campaign and USA Network’s programming as well. This will show that although USA Network’s programming does fit Cawelti’s definitions of formula, the branding campaign and response to it allow USA Network’s content to also fit Mittell’s definition of genre.

NOTES
10 Much has been written about unresolved sexual tension. For a solid survey of all things related to the topic, see “Unresolved Sexual Tension,” TV Tropes, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/UnresolvedSexualTension (accessed 4 February 2012).
12 Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, 60.
16 Cawelti, “Formulas and Genres Reconsidered Once Again,” 136-137.
18 Feuer, “Genre Study and Television,” 144-145, 151.
“Branding, the business of imbuing a generic product with an idea, attitude, or value, has transformed cable networks into one of the most powerful commodities in today’s commercial marketplace. Solid brand equity is a new form of currency (together with ratings) that is exchanged between networks, audiences and advertisers. The networks’ mandate to build and maintain a brand profile, the audience’s thirst for programming tailored to their brand needs, and the advertisers’ desires to be affiliated with strong brands with large niche audiences.” – Kevin S. Sadler, “Synergy Nirvana: Brand Equity, Television Animation and Cartoon Network”

Now that I have explored how USA Network’s stable of programs all exist inside a specific and definable formula, it is time to discuss the cable network’s development of their brand and the issues that come along with that. This chapter begins that process by working through the problems that come with the use of terms like “branding” and “genre,” but also addresses questions of authorship in television. It is useful to define branding and further work out its place within the television industry, but also further discuss how Jason Mittell’s view of genres as discursive cultural categories lines up with branding (and vice versa). The work in this section of the project will both clarify these concepts and solidify how they work together in the case of USA Network.

**Defining branding**
Branding, like formula and genre, is a very tricky term that is hard to define. Branding is regularly used synonymously with other terms like “marketing,” “advertising” and “promotion,” but each of those terms holds different meanings. Yet, we generally think of branding in relationship to those concepts above, so it is appropriate to use the American Marketing Association’s (AMA) definition of branding as a starting point. The AMA defines a consumer brand as:

“A brand is a name, term, sign, design, or a unifying combination of them intended to identify and distinguish the product or service from its competitors. Brand names communicate attributes and meaning that are designed to enhance the value of a product beyond its functional value. The basic reason for branding is to provide a symbol that facilitates rapid identification of the product and its repurchase by customers”

Put more simply, a brand is a company, product, or in this case, a television network’s, reputation that is developed through various marketing processes such as television, print and online advertisements, special promotional events and social media accounts, among other things. In general, the intention of branding is to differentiate a company, product, television network, etc. from and make it stand out against all of the competitors in that market. According to Walter McDowell and Alan Batten in their work Branding TV: Principles and Practices, there are four major elements crucial to the development and sustaining of a brand: brand awareness, brand image, brand attitude and brand equity. Brand awareness simply means how memorable a brand is in the minds of the consumers – what they remember about the brand, why they remember it and more. A brand image passes general awareness and into the “meaning” of the brand – the feelings consumers associate with the brand. Brand attitude takes these feelings one
step further, as it refers to how consumers evaluate and ultimately, respond, to a brand (i.e. purchase, or in this case, watch). Finally, brand equity lifts a brand “beyond its generic category and makes it special,” emphasizing the benefits to the consumer that cannot be seen as simply a function of the product.³

**Branding on television**

These definitions of brands and branding were developed for more general consumer products and brands (think Tide or Colgate toothpaste), but the same branding strategies apply to television networks. From very early on in the development of television, networks have made attempts to differentiate themselves from competitors, whether with names (CBS, NBC, and ABC) or imagery (the CBS eyeball and NBC’s peacock). With the increase in number of cable networks over the past 25 years, competition for viewer attention has increased dramatically. When there are over 50 channels on the most basic of cable provider packages and hundreds and hundreds more available in America alone, it is difficult to stand out among the extreme amount of clutter. Moreover, television, once the dominant element in most of our homes, now has to compete for our attention with video game systems, smartphones, laptops, PCs, iPads, Kindles, Twitter, Facebook, Angry Birds and a dozen other apparatuses and applications, not to mention DVDs, online streaming web sites and DVRs that free television viewers from the constraints of the traditional viewing schedule and habits. If we look at television like a traditional consumer product such as toothpaste, an individual television network is stuck with very little shelf space next to 500 other kinds of toothpaste in a three-mile aisle that also includes not only similar teeth maintenance products that such as mouthwash or floss, but products that are generally more appealing than toothpaste to begin with, such as candy, gum and mints. Standing out amid that kind of competition is supremely difficult and no longer does creating quality programming
work as the sole way to attract new viewers and retain regular ones. Mittell’s work on Cartoon Network and its branding strategies in the 1990s further exemplifies this point. He argues:

“The rise of Cartoon Network points toward the central reorganization of the television industry over the last twenty years, as nonnetwork television channels have reached a level of circulation to become vital players in shaping a genre... Yet as the number of channels has risen, genres can no longer be effectively isolated by timeslot, as entire 24-hour channels exist for news, sports, science-fiction, game shows, music, cooking shows, home improvement programs, and even direct market advertising. The traditional practice of narrowcasting via generic scheduling has given way to channel identity as a prime practice of generic and audience definition.”

Television networks need that extra edge that can entice audiences away from their smartphones and tablets – and this is where branding becomes integral. Networks need brand awareness, they need a brand image and attitude and ultimately, they need to have some brand equity. Audiences have to not only know where a network is on the proverbial dial, but they also have to know what kind of content that network provides and hopefully, that content makes the audience member feel something so that they keep watching, tell their friends and more.

Although branding is becoming an essential tool for television networks, certain cable networks have been successful early adapters of worthwhile branding procedures. Relatively recent scholarship has tackled the brand-building techniques of other major cable networks such as HBO, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network and BET, and as early as 1985, Jane Feuer’s collection on the powerful production company MTM Enterprises suggested that a television industry entity was capable of putting its “signature” onto series and the medium as a whole. For a brief
look at how important branding has become in television, particularly cable television, the
following are short excerpts from works on HBO, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network:

“HBO has taken advantage of its particularly privileged position as a pay cable
network to brand its programming with the ‘quality’ label. … Through its
promotional efforts that the pay network has reconceptualized the term ‘quality.’
It no longer strictly conveys a sense of aesthetic criteria nor does it identify a
particular demographic, but rather, ‘quality’ now denotes a distinction between
HBO and other television networks.”

“The success of branding lies in predictability – children, parents and advertisers
know what to expect when they tune into Nickelodeon, and by branding dayparts
by age, children, parents and advertisers know what target audience is being
served.”

“[P]rogramming is only the first step on the lucrative journey to brand
consciousness for Cartoon Network. Disseminating one’s brand by whatever
means necessary is vital to brand survival, as less brand extensions mean less
brand promotions which means less brand awareness. Cartoon Network is an
industry leader in seeking out manufacturers and retailers, establishing sales
partnerships, and developing consumer outreach events to infuse their brand with
greater meaning beyond the television screen, which, of course, lines the
pocketbooks of AOL Time Warner’s shareholders.”

It is clear that branding is now one of the most crucial tools a television network has in its
arsenal. Although I see USA Network as a somewhat inimitable case of the relationship between
the brand image and the programming formula, I am in no way asserting that the network is the first to emphasize a certain brand and brand ideology. The cases of HBO, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network provide fine context for describing branding’s place within the television industry.

**Authorship in television**

These recent case studies the concept of branding toward the muddled waters of another complicated topic: authorship. Reading a network as one unit creating a specific image or kind of televisual formula raises the question of whether or not these multi-layered, horizontally- and vertically-integrated companies actually serve as “authors” in the traditional sense. Of course, considerations of authorship are problematic in general and especially so in the case of television. Although author-centric analysis took film scholarship and criticism by storm after François Truffaut’s 1954 article, “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema,” that sort of intense focus on one singular voice rising above the hundreds of people working on a film has been criticized substantially over the years. As a result, scholarship turned to conceiving of authorship and auteur-ism as analytical tools that help organize and stratify texts. Michel Foucault argues that authorship should not be focused on the individual creating texts and linking them together with their personal signature. Instead, he views authorship as a culturally activated function spurred on and used by critics and scholars to link texts after the fact. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott expand on Foucault’s concept of authorship, noting that the “author function” has three cultural facets: as a classification system, a site of interpretive consistency and a marker of cultural value. The author function allows critics and scholars to organize and evaluate texts in all different types of ways, but it does not necessarily mean that the organizational and evaluative practices of critics and scholars are based on features found
directly within the texts themselves; they are often applied after-the-fact. While the three facets are not exceptionally pertinent here, the primary point remains: authorship is constructed more by cultural discourse than by the artists themselves.

In television, discussions of authorship and the auteur are even more problematic. Although film scholars have spent decades tinkering with authorship and the auteur theory in their field, developments in the television studies field have been slower, partially because of the nature of the medium itself. In the introduction to the first edition of *Channels of Discourse*, Robert C. Allen succinctly describes this problem:

“Where better to observe the circumscribed role of the author in contemporary cultural production than in commercial television? Because of the technological complexity of the medium and as a result of the application, to television production, of the principles of modern industrial organization (mass production, detailed division of labor, etc.), it is very difficult to locate the “author” of a television program – if we mean by that term the single individual who provides the unifying vision behind the program.”

Similarly, in the introduction of their edited collection *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process* Robert J. Thompson and Gary Burns note that it is difficult to apply any sort of authorship analysis to television because it “appeared authorless (or, to be more precise, so confusingly polyauthorial).” Like film, television production includes the work of hundreds of individuals and therefore analyzing the final product as the unique vision of one person is troublesome. Ongoing series gain and lose writers, producers, directors, actors, key grips, etc., and even if an entire production staff stays exactly the same for five seasons, writers and directors change on an episode-to-episode basis, making it still challenging to suggest an
individual’s singular vision. Complicating matters further is the television’s (perceived) formulaic-ness, wherein most episodes of a certain series have to exist within the constraints of both television (with commercial-enabled act breaks and running times, certain decency and censorship requirements) and the series itself. In that respect, television is both too fluid and too formulaic on a weekly basis to fully argue for the existence or usefulness of the auteur theory in television. This of course has not stopped scholars from identifying the likes of Bill Cosby\(^\text{17}\), Hugh Wilson\(^\text{18}\) and Jerry Bruckheimer\(^\text{19}\) as televisual auteurs. The recent trend in television and entertainment publications of identifying the television “showrunner,” the individual or team of people in charge of not only a series’ creative vision, but also its day-to-day operations, furthers the idea that we are in some ways still interested in applying a singular voice onto television texts.\(^\text{20}\)

Analyzing television through the prism of the auteur theory is certainly problematic, however, what about the possibility of identifying a larger entity as an author? We already know that it is naïve to assume that one person can completely control and alter a series’ vision and voice. Perhaps then it is necessary to discard adapting the concept of authorship to television around the clear logistical fallacies television production presents and instead alter our ideas of authorship to fit the obvious constraints and realities of the medium’s production. Meaning, if we are to analyze television with authorship in mind, we may be best suited by embracing the fact that hundreds of people work on an individual episode and subsequently identify “authors” outside of the writers’ room. Instead of looking at *The Sopranos*’ David Chase, *Deadwood*’s David Milch or *The Wire*’s David Simon as individual auteurs, perhaps we should view the network that brought them all together, HBO, as an authorial entity in its own right. Viewing
larger units as authors brings us back to branding and formula. In the introduction to *Nickelodeon Nation*, Heather Hendershot notes that:

“While film scholars have given us portraits of specific studios and directors, television scholars have focused less on specific ‘auteurs’ (individual or corporate). Television is even more the product of assembly-line production than film is, making it difficult to associate specific styles with specific creators. …it is clear that individual networks have aggressively forged “brand identities” for themselves as a way of standing out in the increasingly diversified cable environment.”

With networks making such a pointed effort to group content in some way (either through programming formula, branding campaigns or a combination of both), those overall through-lines could be read as authorial in a way. These approaches are obviously techniques to help the networks draw attention to themselves, but can we analyze them further? What is particularly interesting about television branding is how closely it begins to mirror authorship- and auteur-centered analyses typically reserved for individuals. Authorship inquiry is generally reserved for texts themselves, but applying similar logic to both the programming formula and extratextual content like branding makes sense considering the two are becoming more and more linked in contemporary television. And even though television does appear to be more like an assembly line, to use Hendershot’s phrasing, analyzing that assembly line can be both fruitful and informative.

Jane Feuer’s analysis of the industrial and creative might of MTM Enterprises is one of the more notable examples of “assembly line authorship analysis” and her work also serves as something of a precursor for the more recent analysis of specific networks. Thomas Schatz’s
work on Desilu’s production history and David Marc’s analysis of Screen Gems’ sitcom development in the 1960s are similar, but not as expansive and informative as Feuer’s MTM work. Feuer notes that deciphering the connections between what she calls the “commodity production” (the industry/business) and the “textual production” (the series itself) is challenging and argues that “If the corporate structure of MTM does not directly cause the structure of the texts or determine their reception, neither is it true that there is no relationship between the two levels.” These statements suggest that Feuer is weary of directly connecting the business aspects of television to the series themselves. This is an obvious fear to have considering that most of the time, the people making the business decisions and the people making the creative decisions are not one in the same and in many cases, neither side has much knowledge into what the other is doing. This kind of production process disrupts traditional author-centric perspectives.

Nevertheless, Feuer also notes that MTM Enterprises can be identified as a “corporate ‘author’,” a term I find very useful. It serves as a suitable label for 21st century networks trying their hardest to create an easily consumable and identifiable brand image for themselves. We can view the construction of a brand image as having “authorial intent” because the image is created with an obvious desire to connect themes, structures and images and evoke certain values. There may be hundreds of people working in different departments to craft this brand image, but if the end product is cohesive, their disparate work feels linked. Jonathan David Tankel emphasizes this point in his exploration of The Avengers, arguing that “marketing decisions made by executives of a television production company can be viewed as part of the collective authorship of the television program.” By combining both Feuer and Tankel’s terms, we could identify modern television network branding attempts as a form of “collective
corporate authorship.” This namesake accentuates both the mass of people it takes to create thematically-linked formulas and campaigns, as well as the underlying business and financial considerations of the processes. Collective corporate authorship aims to bring in the most viewers possible, with considerations for “quality” (which are typically reserved for authorship studies) not always necessary. HBO certainly wants to emphasize its “quality” with the “It’s not TV. It’s HBO” branding campaign, but other notable branding successes like Nickelodeon, BET and Cartoon Network are not powered by the same kind of emphasis on quality, taste and distinction.27

This brings us to USA Network, an incomparable case in regard to authorship and collective corporate authorship specifically. The programming formula that I discussed in the previous chapter is so well-developed and ingrained into each of the network’s series that it alone could be viable for some form of authorship study. Even though each of USA Network’s series is produced and written by different groups of people, certain textual markers in Character, setting, narrative development, etc. are present across every one of the series. These shared markers make USA Network’s programming formula the perfect representative of Feuer’s corporate author concept. USA Network’s programming formula embodies textual similarities and conjures ideas of summer, escapism and inclusiveness, serving as the network’s corporate signature that could be deciphered from all the texts in the formula. There is a general formula to the way in which USA Network’s series are presented across media platforms, just as there is a general formula to the way in which the series exist and develop within their own diegetic story worlds. Therefore, the connections between different elements of USA Network’s brand image can be evaluated using authorship arguments. And of course, the financial reasons for creating such a brand are powered by corporate decision-making. Thus, separately, USA Network’s
programming and brand image could both be evaluated under the corporate authorship umbrella. But USA Network intentionally tethers its brand image to its programming formula, blurring the lines between Feuer’s “commodity production” and “textual production,” creating a collective corporate author. As a collective corporate author these two sides work together to activate the USA Network generic category. USA Network joins its branding and programming to solidify visual, emotional and thematic through-lines that exist in everything the network produces and airs, making it a fine representative of the collective corporate author concept.

Although the terminology is not the same, Mittell’s development of genres as cultural categories admittedly builds from the way in which previous scholars like Foucault, Bennett and Woollacott conceive of authorship. Mittell’s thoughts on genre are entrenched in cultural construction and he urges us to focus on the definition, interpretation and evaluation of genres by cultural forces in the way that Foucault, Bennett and Woollacott push us to view authorship. Mittell posits that genre and authorship are two of the primary ways in which we classify popular culture texts and although my interest is in exploring how USA Network works to activate a new generic category, this analysis assumes that as an industrial force, USA Network does have a lot of power. I will be spending a great deal of time exploring how USA Network discursively self-activates and self-defines the USA Network generic category and therefore, my discussion of its branding strategies and genre activation blur the lines between genre analysis and authorship analysis. Again, I am interested in how branding and genres, as cultural categories, merge with one another. However, my focus on USA Network as the most powerful participant in the branding-genre merger suggests that the network could be identified as a collective corporate author.

**USA Network’s brand image, its meaning and more**
I would like to now return to the development of USA Network’s brand more specifically. Though a full measurement of brand awareness, brand attitude and brand equity is difficult to obtain without interviewing or surveying millions of television viewers, we can make a few assumptions about the audience’s awareness and overall evaluation of the USA Network “Characters Welcome” branding campaign. First of all, USA Network’s consistent ratings successes indicate that audiences are aware of the network’s programming content, meaning we can assume those audiences are also familiar with USA Network’s branding content. The reality that not one of the series developed and aired in the “Characters Welcome” era has been canceled by the network further exemplifies USA Network’s general triumph, a triumph that should include the branding campaign. This suggests that the general attitude towards the USA Network brand is positive. Clearly, not everyone who sees a commercial for *Burn Notice* or *Royal Pains* watches those series and there is no way to determine exactly how people see these commercials to begin with. However, USA Network’s place as the top-rated cable network on all of television tells us that the branding campaign has been – and continues to be – positively received by a large number of viewers. Secondly, the simple fact that USA Network has not scrapped the “Characters Welcome” campaign for something newer proposes that the network’s management believes it to be a major achievement. We can also assume that USA Network’s executives would not keep a branding campaign around if it failed to accomplish the goals they wanted it to, and whatever those internal goals are, positive audience response has to be one of them. If the viewers of USA Network did not like the “Characters Welcome” television spots – and thus did not give the brand much equity – it would have been discarded long ago. Therefore, I think it is safe to assume that audiences are aware, likely even *very* aware, of USA Network’s “Characters Welcome” branding campaign. The successes of USA Network’s programming over
the past seven years suggest that audiences also hold the network in high esteem and therefore give it positive equity. I will discuss the audience’s response to the network’s branding campaigns in more detail in chapter four.

Here, I want to focus on one major element of the brand-building process: the brand image. USA Network has intelligently developed and maintained its brand image through television advertisements, online web pages, social media accounts, special events and even scheduling, all of which are thematically connected to USA Network’s “blue skies” vision that accentuates sun-drenched, summertime imagery and escapist, but not mindless feelings. Highlighting the cultivation of this brand image is a useful strategy, primarily because it ties directly into my overall argument about the USA Network generic category, and because it flows nicely from Jason Mittell’s construction of genre through discursive practices. Mittell argues that genres are defined, interpreted and evaluated in the intertext and paratext by three different groups: the industry, the audience and the critical community. I see USA Network’s “Characters Welcome” branding campaign as a fascinating example of the work that the first group, the industry, can do in defining a genre. This example is perhaps even more than defining and actually closer to creating since the “USA Network genre” of programming did not exist before the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign began in 2005. Mittell’s work on the role of the industry in activating and defining generic categories further supports my claims about the impact of USA Network’s branding strategies. In his discussion of recent developments related to television branding, Mittell proposes:

“The identity of the channel or network carrying a program also can activate genres explicitly (Comedy Central) or implicitly (NBC’s reputation for urban white sitcoms in the 1990s). This is clearly more prevalent in recent years, given
the outgrowth of cable/satellite channels with explicit generic names (SoapNet and Game Show Network) or generic acronyms (CNN’s Cable News Network and A&E’s Arts and Entertainment)… Any channel develops its identity by accumulating assumptions from programming decisions and promotional strategies, forming a framework for audience comprehension often linked to genre categories.”

The development of USA Network’s sunshine-soaked brand image is the key platform where the industry (in this case, USA Network as powerful network in the television industry) has worked to activate a new genre. Because of USA Network’s generalized, vague name, the development of its genre would have to be called “implicit” using Mittell’s terms, but I would argue that it is more explicit than NBC’s connection to upper-middle class white sitcoms in the 1990s. As a cable network, USA Network has the benefit of “narrowcasting,” meaning they are not required to appeal to everyone (or “broadcast” like NBC or CBS, FOX and ABC are more or less required to do). We can look at the “explicitness” of network genre activation as a continuum, wherein cable networks with very obvious genre activation in their name (such as Comedy Central, Food Network, Style, etc.) exist on one end, broadcast networks with broad, but generally-connected-in-some-way programs on the other and more complicated cases like USA Network somewhere in the middle (and in this case, closer to the “explicit” than “implicit” side of the continuum).

Moreover, we can identify USA Network’s branding strategies as part of the intertextual space “outside” the text of USA Network programs. Mittell argues that modern genre analysis should “decenter the text as the primary site of genre” and instead focus on the intertextual discourse surrounding a series or a group of series that industry forces, audiences and critics engage in on a regular basis. The branding strategies of USA Network serve as part of the
industry-created intertextual discourse surrounding the cable network’s programming formula. The branding processes are therefore representative of Mittell’s argument that genres are at activated, defined, interpreted and evaluated by forces outside texts themselves.

And again, what makes USA Network a particularly noteworthy case study is how the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign shares thematic and aesthetic connections with the network’s programming formula that was discussed in the previous chapter. Much like the commercials that advertise them, USA Network’s original series emphasize certain archetypes and ideals – beautiful locales, eccentric Characters, sunshine, blue skies, inclusiveness and escapism. Considering the links between USA Network’s programming formula and its branding strategy brings us back to Mittell’s discussion of genres as cultural categories:

“Categories link a number of discreet elements together under a label for cultural convenience. While the members constituting a category might all possess some inherent trait binding them into the category (perhaps all horror texts do have monsters), there is nothing intrinsic about the category itself. …there are no uniform criteria for genre delimitation – some are defined by setting (like westerns), some by profession (like legal dramas), some by audience affect (like comedy), and some narrative form (like mysteries). This diversity of definitional criteria suggests that there is nothing internal to texts mandating how they are to be generically categorized – in some instances, the same text becomes ‘regenrified’ as cultural contexts shift. If the same text is flexible enough to be categorized into various genres, it follows that the confines of the text cannot be the sole repository for generic definitions.”31
Mittell’s argument about the lack of intrinsic properties in genres applies well to USA Network’s programming. USA Network’s series cross the profession, audience affect and narrative form criteria that Mittell mentions here. The characters in USA Network’s series range from licensed spies and burned spies to FBI and local police consultants to out-of-work doctors and lawyer-turned-mediators. There is no professional thread that ties each of these series together.

Similarly, something like *Psych* stands out as a comedic-leaning series amid a group of more straight-faced peers. And while many of USA Network’s series do follow a fairly standard narrative form template (weekly problem that needs solved), those narratives are altered ever slightly to fit the various’ series professional backdrops. *Burn Notice*’s Michael Westen and *Royal Pains*’ Hank Lawson both fix and solve problems each week, but they do so in entirely different ways. Although USA Network’s programs all share a number of character, setting and narrative templates and thus constitute a formula, those common textual qualities alone are not enough to activate and define a genre. However, combining that programming formula with USA Network’s “Characters Welcome” branding campaign does help to activate the USA Network generic category into existence.

Using Mittell’s concept of genres as discursive cultural categories to define USA Network’s programming as its own genre creates opportunities for further connections between traditional ideas of genre and branding. One of the more important elements of the typical construction of genre is the ideology or overall “meaning” of that genre. Thomas Schatz describes the importance of theme and ideology in *Hollywood Genres*:

> “Each genre’s implicit system of values and beliefs – its ideology or world view – determines its cast of characters, its problems (dramatic conflicts), and the solutions to those problems. In fact, we might define film genres, particularly at
the earlier stages of their development, as social problem-solving operations: They repeatedly confront the ideological conflicts (opposing value systems) within a certain cultural community, suggesting various solutions through the actions of the main characters. Thus, each genre’s problem-solving function affects its distinct formal and conceptual identity.”

From the exploration of teen sexuality that defines the slasher film to the emphasis on learning to fit in with the help of your friends that typically powers teen dramas, major genres have a particular thematic center that is regularly accentuated and upheld in each individual iteration. Schatz further argues that one of the primary markers for sustained success of a genre is how easily audiences accept the genre’s thematic concerns. A genre has to “mean” something and the audience has to accept that meaning for the genre to continue and be financially viable. The importance of meaning to the genre is mirrored in the importance of meaning in the creation of the brand image. Again, the intent of creating a brand image is to help a brand exceed general awareness and begin to signify something more to the consumer (in this case, the audience). Without a larger, easily transmitted and easily consumable meaning, a brand can never reach high levels of recognition, respect and equity. Returning to the toothpaste analogy again for a moment, if a consumer has a no connection or cannot identify what a toothpaste brand stands for beyond its name and packaging, they are probably not going to pick it out among the 700 others in the three-mile-long aisle. The kind of consumer response that is required for the success of a brand image is the same one that is required for the success of a genre’s overall meaning.

In the genre activation and definition processes, the overall meaning of the genre and the brand image can be one and the same. Following Mittell’s assertions that genres are at least partially activated and defined by industry forces and my assertion that branding is the chief
platform in which this genre activation takes place, the brand and the genre are intensely linked to one another. The elements that define the brand and are stressed in the marketing materials are the same ones that are highlighted within the series that make up the genre. This overlap between brand and genre extends to the overall meaning and thematic concerns of both, wherein the television spots or promotional events that serve as brand-builders point out specific ideological or thematic touchstones that are also represented in the genre itself. The development of and connection between brand image and genre meaning is an important step for television’s networks to take. Successful branding does not always kick-start the genre activation and definition process, but when it does, the brand image has noticeable connections to the genre’s overall denotation. USA Network’s brand image is an especially compelling example of this process. The image USA Network creates with branding underscores the blue skies and sunshine of its series’ beautiful locations, the quirkiness of the lead Characters and connotes feelings of escapism, summer and inclusiveness. The imagery and ideals that are emphasized in commercials for USA Network’s series are the same ones that define the series themselves, and thus, the generic category. As a distinct generic category, USA Network offers fun, populist escapism that promotes the ideology that everyone, no matter their quirks or tics, can be a Character with exceptional skills and a solid moral code – just as the slasher genre represents an exploration of teenage sexual promiscuity.

This is only part of the genre activation process that Mittell sketches out. USA Network, as the “industry” prong of Mittell’s three-pronged approach, powers the activation of this new generic category. However, complete genre definition must also include an interpretation and evaluation of said genre. Both critics and audiences need to take part in these procedures. Even if USA Network works to activate the formula into a genre and subsequently attempts to define
what the genre *means* or *is* through its brand image, it still needs audiences and critics to acknowledge and accept this new genre. Without those additional layers of interpretation and evaluation, the genre activation process becomes just like the “ideological process” discussed by Jane Feuer and Rick Altman where the media industries use genres to spread their specific hegemonic beliefs and ideologies. Nevertheless, it seems economical to separate the industrial definition and the audience and critic interpretation/evaluation. Although I do not believe that USA Network totally forces key ideological beliefs on its unknowing audience, it is difficult to deny that the network, as an agent of the industry, plays the biggest role in the creation of the USA Network generic category. Audiences and critics *are* important, but evidence suggests that USA Network’s cunning branding strategies have had the most impact in the genre activation. Mittell suggests this sort of industrial influence is typically true in his discussion of the industry’s role in genre activation by noting that “The role of the industry in generic processes supersedes the traditional confines of production as the primary industrial practice, especially for the television medium.” Therefore, the following chapter will focus on USA Network’s cultivation of a brand image and how it constitutes genre definition, while later chapters will discuss the second and third prongs of the generic category’s development with analysis of audience and critical responses to USA Network’s industrial genre activation and definition.

NOTES
4 Jason Mittell, “From Saturday Morning to Around the Clock – The Industrial Practices of Television Cartoons,” in *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 82.

6 MTM Enterprises produced a slew of successful television programs in the 1970s and 1980s, from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Bob Newhart Show* to *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*.


15 Notable showrunners include *The Sopranos*’ David Chase, *The Wire*’s David Simon and *Lost*’s Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof, but nearly every series’ showrunner is identified at some point in industry trade publications and more “mainstream” reports found in *Entertainment Weekly* or *TV Guide*.


36 Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, 56.
CHAPTER III. SUNSCREEN, SUNGLASSES AND A BLOCK OF C4: EXPLORING USA NETWORK’S GENRE-DEFINING BRAND IMAGE

“I think in some ways it [obvious branding] can be [difficult]. But a good brand is an environment – a place where success can build on success--so I think it's a filter rather than a trap. It's a filter for people to approach you and to see the unifying vision of what you can do.” – USA Network’s head of original programming Jeff Wachtel on whether the brand is a trap in a July 2010 interview with Forbes

Each of USA Network’s series follows the guidelines of a very specific formula, but the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign has helped the USA Network formula become recognizable as a separate genre. USA Network’s branding processes are certainly part of a larger trend in the television industry, but the ways in which both the brand image and the programming (or as Feuer calls it, the commodity production and the textual production) align are novel and innovative. This chapter will focus on a number of specific branding materials as to show how USA Network has worked to activate its formula into a genre through the intertextual brand image.

There are many ways in which networks can work to shape new genres: television advertisements, print advertisements, online web sites and advertisements, social media accounts, special promotional events and even how series are scheduled. Mittell’s approach to networks’ place in genre activation and definition boils these various techniques down to only two categories:

“Two specific types of television’s industrial practices seem particularly relevant for understanding television genres: program scheduling and channel identity…”
These two industrial practices of scheduling and channel identity forge discursive associations within a genre, activating cultural hierarchies and values, mobilizing certain assumptions of ‘proper’ audience identity and pleasures, and policing the boundary of what texts are legitimate components of the genre.\(^3\)

Although his choice of words differs from mine, Mittell’s use of “channel identity” falls right into line with my focus on brand image. As I have already posited, the creation and the development of a brand image is one of the most crucial processes industrial forces have for attracting viewers, but also in defining genres. Although Mittell narrows one of the industrial practices to simply “channel identity,” he later discusses the things that make up that identity, such as advertising, marketing and more.\(^4\) My more specific list of practices might include a wider range of possible avenues for brand development (and thus genre activation) that are more in line with today’s entertainment and technology landscapes, but Mittell and I are on the same page with what kind of processes industry entities can partake in to activate and define genres.

Mittell also separates scheduling completely from brand image, an approach that is more useful for his specific case study of Cartoon Network than it is for USA Network. I would argue that USA Network’s scheduling strategies, especially the seasonal placement of its series, are integral to the development of the brand and the genre and it is thus not entirely necessary to separate scheduling decisions from brand image development. I would argue that everything I am going to discuss, from television advertisements to special promotions to scheduling, falls under the umbrella of brand image. The following pages will discuss different branding products USA Network has produced over the last seven years: television commercials, print advertisements, promotional events, web sites and social media accounts. I will also briefly touch on USA Network’s scheduling practices and press interviews with its management. My hope is that
coverage of seven different platforms will exemplify how well-developed the USA Network brand is and thus how the network has kick-started the genre activation and definition process.

**USA Network’s self-defined and activated discourses: Origins of the cross-series spots**

Even right before the “Characters Welcome” era in 2004, USA Network had an obvious template in mind for how the on-air advertisements should play out: Put the lead Characters together and let them playfully interact for 20-40 seconds. Based on my research, this format was first seen in a 2004 advertisement for the then-new seasons of *Monk* and *The Dead Zone*. In the spot, *Monk*’s Adrian Monk and *The Dead Zone*’s Johnny Smith are at an American Detectives Association conference discussing Johnny’s powers. Monk is not skeptical of Johnny’s ability to see people’s pasts or futures simply by touching them, but is more concerned about the whole touching thing since he is a germophobic obsessive compulsive. As Johnny explains how his powers work, Monk tries to keep up with the conversation while avoiding touching or being touched by the people walking through their corner of the ballroom. Their conversation partially explains the premises of *The Dead Zone* and *Monk* but there is no specific information given about the plot details of either series. There are no cutaway scenes from the Characters’ (though the brand campaign had yet to begin, these two are still Characters in the way USA Network later defined them) respective series, nor is there further explanation about where they are from or why they are at the ADA conference. The emphasis is on these two individuals and their barely-explained eccentricities.

This commercial relies on the audience knowing who these men are or hopes they will be charmed enough to watch anyway. The spot ends with the pre-“Characters Welcome” USA Network logo. Ultimately, this commercial tells viewers that if they watch this network, they will be given full-episode bursts of the kind of energy seen in the commercial. It highlights a light,
energetic vibe, even though *The Dead Zone* is not a particularly light or energetic series. One thing worth pointing out is how dark the lighting is in this quick spot. Whereas future USA Network commercials accentuate blue skies and sunshine, the lighting here is mostly dim, primarily coming from fluorescent lights. Again, the commercial itself is not “dark,” but the different lighting is one element of the later, more developed formula that is missing here. Even without the closing tag of “Characters Welcome,” this 2004 commercial plants the seeds for the branding campaign it would establish just a year later.

In one of the first television commercials in the “Characters Welcome” era from 2006, USA Network expanded on the format of the *Monk-Dead Zone* commercial, this time integrating new series *Psych*. The 40-second spot features Monk, Johnny and *Psych*’s Shawn Spencer, and much like the one from 2004, it features Characters vaguely discussing their skills. In the commercial’s diner setting, Shawn complains to Johnny that his ability to touch someone and see their future “is not fair,” but Johnny believes Shawn’s photographic memory is pretty cool as well. The two of them briefly mention other plot details – Johnny was in a coma, Shawn has a rocky relationship with his father – but by the end of the commercial they are distracted by Monk counting kernels of corn in the next booth over. Shawn and Johnny agree that their lives “could be worse” while Monk never acknowledges their presence. There are few plot details given as the focus is instead on the fast-paced conversation between the Characters themselves. The spot ends with a cut to the “Characters Welcome” logo while a twangy guitar riff randomly plays. Even more than the 2004 commercial focusing on *Monk* and *The Dead Zone*, this 2006 spot serves as the template that USA Network has used in more recent years. This commercial takes the Characters away from a specific professional location (like the American Detectives Association conference) and places them in a much more neutral-coded spot in a diner. This
location change removes any of the connotations of “detective” and makes Johnny, Shawn and Monk seem more “normal” or at least relatable in that they eat at busy diners like the rest of us. USA Network wants its Characters to be idiosyncratic and unique, but not so much so that the audience is unable to identify with them. Secondly, this 2006 commercial includes much better lighting, as the Characters are shot from an angle that emphasizes the bright sunshine coming through the windows behind them. There still is not a direct shot of the sky like there is in later spots, but the brightness is still noticeable, especially in contrast to the more artificial light in the 2004 *Monk-Dead Zone* commercial.

This commercial with Monk, Johnny and Shawn highlights the Character, inclusiveness and escapism. It underscores the importance of the Characters and hints at the similarities in their respective skill-sets, thus acknowledging the formulaic pattern at work. The man are presented as off-beat, playful individuals who each have a curious skill – even if the clip does not mention what that skill is used for. This commercial reinforces more about the “Character” of USA Network’s Characters than it does about the series in which those Characters exist. Moreover, because the commercial takes place in a normal-looking diner, the Characters appear more relatable. This setting emphasizes that while these individuals are highly skilled in one very specific area, they are still “normal” enough to go to a crowded diner in the middle of the day. By creating special, but relatable Characters, USA Network taps into a psychological need of the viewers. The commercial invites the viewers into the conversation and thus, the brand. It is shot with close-ups as if the audience is right there with Johnny, Shawn and Monk, and the slogan includes the word “welcome.” Combined, these elements tell the viewers that not only are USA Network’s programs full of Characters, they also suggest that the network needs viewers who embody similar Character-like traits. The “welcome” part of the slogan underscores the
programming formula yet also serves as an invitation for the audience to join a world where being slightly off-center is not only okay, it is celebrated and welcome. Therefore, the commercial not only emphasizes the personalities of USA Network’s fictional Characters, it also serves as a call to action for the audience to interact with fascinating people just like themselves. These elements work together to not only thematically and aesthetically connect USA Network’s programming formula to its brand image, but also pulls the audience into USA Network’s world where everyone is special, even if they look normal.

This commercial helps connect USA Network’s branding with ideas of escapism. Even though the Characters are in a crowded diner, the scene is framed so that the sunshine saturates their conversation. This little feature of the commercial could remind the viewer that not only does USA Network present quirky Characters, but they offer sunny settings that help us escape from the dreariness of normal life as well. The conversation between Shawn and Johnny is fast-paced and when the attention turns to Monk, it becomes very funny. USA Network is trying to present its Characters as not only relatable, but also enjoyable to be around. No one watching this commercial would think that USA Network features programming that is “heavy” or thematically dense; instead, they would surely see it as easy and fun. As a result, both the content of this commercial and the sun-drenched aesthetics help USA Network establish itself as a destination for escape.

If we were to define USA Network’s programming formula as its own generic category based on this commercial, the definition would look something like this: the USA Network genre is full of off-beat Characters using their special skills to help people in sunny locations. This definition is not substantially different from the ways in which I identified USA Network’s programming as a formula, but using Mittell’s utterances of intertextual definition, we can view
USA Network’s brand campaign as the element that raises the programming from just a formula into a genre. USA Network presents an easily defined formula with its programming (i.e. the full episodes of its various series) and through the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign it makes that formula even more appealing and definable. In a chapter outlining Cartoon Network’s brand/formula/genre practices, Mittell notes that a network’s “industrial practices are constitutive of a genre, through a range of techniques including original production, marketing and advertising.” USA Network’s ability to match its programming formula with its branding mirrors Cartoon Network’s approach and underscores that even though genres are not inherently found within texts, media producers can attempt to make their own generic categories.

**USA Network’s self-defined and activated discourses: Recent cross-series television spots**

The format USA Network developed for its cross-series television commercials just before and at the outset of the “Characters Welcome” era continued in the years following the 2006 *Monk-Psych-Dead Zone* spot. The network has regularly used that framework as a way to publicize not only multiple series at once, but also the brand in general. Although USA Network has produced a number of different commercials in this format in recent years, it is economical to only discuss two in particular, as both represent some of the most obvious formula-genre-brand overlap.

air in 2009 than they had in 2006, USA Network could jam-pack its cross-series commercials with as many as 10 fictional Characters. What is distinctive about this commercial is that the Characters are not simply interacting with one another as they were in the 2004 and 2006 iterations. Instead, the Characters exist in the same space as an unnamed white male. As the unnamed man completes a typical day of tasks, USA Network Characters surround him: Monk organizes messy bathroom shelves while the unnamed man brushes his teeth; Michael and Fiona use toaster as a bomb; Goren and Nichols transport a criminal in the back of his car; Molly gives a red carpet speech outside his workplace; Mary protects a witness from a shootout in his office; John Cena throws an opponent through a park bench during his lunch break; and Gus tries to keep Shawn from hitting on the his date. Throughout the commercial, this unnamed man acknowledges the presence of the Characters, but only slightly. He does not talk to them, yet does aloofly nod when his toaster blows up and the shootout breaks out near the water cooler. The brightly-lit and upbeat-scored spot ends with a blue title card that says “Characters so original, they stick with you.”

There is a lot to unpack with this minute-long commercial, as it does a few slightly different things than the 2004 and 2006 spots while still connecting back to the programming formula and stressing the importance of Character, escapism, inclusiveness and sunshine. Instead of having the Characters talk about their eccentricities like they did in the first commercials discussed, the Characters here personify their eccentric traits. Only Goren and Nichols actually speak and they do not actually speak to the unnamed man. The rest of the Characters are shown doing something that easily sums up their personality and the series they call home – obsessive-compulsive cleaning, blowing things up, protecting witnesses, wrestling, etc. – but again, there is little explanation about who the Characters are or where they are from.
There are probably a few reasons for this altered approach. By early 2009, the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign had been in circulation for nearly five years and the commercial format in circulation longer. Due to the campaign’s longevity it is safe to assume that USA Network did not need to have its Characters speak and describe (if even vaguely) their backgrounds. Most viewers probably had a general awareness or knowledge of USA Network and its series. Secondly, this commercial aired during the Super Bowl, an event that attracts a much larger and more diverse audience than normal television programs (especially compared to the niches of basic cable). The commercial served as an introduction to USA Network to those among the 98.7 million people who watched Super Bowl XLIII and were previously unfamiliar with the network, its series and its brand. Perhaps that is why this commercial includes a Character from each of the series that existed at the point instead of the typical three-to-four Character focus in the spots that are on USA Network itself. And perhaps it is also why the commercial uses visual shorthand to depict what it is these Characters do, as it is presumably much easier to convey that Mary Shannon helps witness protection members by showing her doing such a thing instead of didactically saying it.

Finally, this commercial serves as an example of how USA Network likes to bond its branding products with its programming formula. By showing the Characters doing the things that they do, this commercial makes obvious connections between USA Network’s promotions and programming. The 2004 and 2006 spots did this more implicitly by having the Characters vaguely describe personal and professional backgrounds, but here, the Characters’ personalities are more defined. This spot still does not show any specific scenes from the respective series to put their actions into context. However, it does present enough information for the viewer to make general assumptions about the Characters. Those people who watched the Super Bowl in
2009 and were unaware of what *Burn Notice* was could have still recognized that the male-female duo that turns a toaster into a bomb is not a typical television couple.

Moreover, to my knowledge this is the first USA Network cross-series commercial that explicitly integrates a non-Character into the proceedings. This commercial still focuses on the zany ticks of the Characters, but it is also built around their place in the life of a normal-looking individual. This approach accomplishes some new things for USA Network and its brand image and makes some previously implicit techniques more explicit. In my analysis of the 2006 commercial I noted that the new camera angles and setting change further emphasized that viewers were “welcome” to be a part of USA Network’s family. This Super Bowl spot makes the interconnectedness of fictional Characters and “real” people much more obvious, underscoring that USA Network wants to tap into a certain emotional desire in the audience’s mind to be invited into the USA Network world, as it were. The unnamed man at the center of this commercial is especially nondescript and “normal” looking, a casting decision that points out how easy it is to fit in with USA Network’s Characters and allows the audience to view themselves as taking the place of this blank slate of a man. The unnamed man has a normal routine – brushing his teeth, eating breakfast, working at a regular job. This plain-ness makes the unnamed man relatable to the audience and his connection to the Characters arguably makes him special in the USA Network sense of the word. People want to feel like their boring lives are actually more exciting than they are and that their personality quirks are completely normal. With this commercial, USA Network is fully embracing those things and conveying a message to the audience at home that their hopes are realized. The obvious intent of the commercial’s final tagline is to highlight how the network’s Characters are “so original, they stick” with audiences, but a certain reading could say that it goes the other way as well. Meaning, the tagline tells the
audience that they themselves (with this unnamed man serving as their proxy) are “original,” and so much so that the fictional Characters of USA Network want to “stick” around with the audience just as much as the audience wants to stick with the Characters. In this world of USA Network where everyone is slightly odd, new members are welcomed readily.

In the three years between the 2006 spot and this one, it appears that USA Network figured out how to stress the blue sky- and sunshine-drenched visuals in the commercials that it also celebrates in its programs. This spot is very brightly lit, even in darker spaces like a bathroom or a typically dreary office. When the unnamed man is in rooms with windows or outside, the sun is visibly beating down upon him and the Characters around him. The sky and sunlight are easily visible throughout this spot. Finally, the background card that the final slogan appears on is a sky blue shade, one of the colors USA Network tries to work into many of its promotional materials so as to highlight the blue skies of the brand image. This commercial is aesthetically similar to many of USA Network’s series and finds a way to accentuate the important elements of the brand image: sunshine, blue skies, the color blue, etc.

This television spot further underscores the importance of escapism to USA Network’s brand image and as a generic category. This commercial approaches escapism in an interesting way by relating back to the inclusion of the audience as Characters. Instead of foregrounding sandy beaches and ocean water this commercial presents the audience with an escape from the mundane realities of their normal lives through the unnamed man. Though the unnamed man goes through a typical routine that involves work, the place of the Characters surrounding him hints that with USA Network in your life, even the most usual of days becomes slightly more. Brushing your teeth provides a moment to escape with USA Network, eating breakfast provides a moment to escape with USA Network, driving to work provides a moment to escape with USA
Network, etc. Of course, USA Network wants the viewer to feel like they can escape from the constraints of all the other, “boring” television out there as well.

The Super Bowl commercial presents the same kind of thematic and aesthetic properties that most USA Network branding products do and again, these properties are similarly found within the programming formula of USA Network as well. When considering the context in which this television commercial aired (during the most-watched television event of all-time), we can further identify it as part of USA Network’s ongoing self-activation and definition of the new generic category. This commercial fairly clearly identifies what USA Network is all about – the Characters, inclusiveness, sunshine, blue skies, escapism – and makes certain that it looks similar to how the series it is promoting also look. Again recalling Mittell’s analysis of Cartoon Network and its branding further helps underscore this point:

“Cartoon Network is a primary site of industrial practice constituting cartoon genre in the 1990s, directly drawing upon and transforming the larger generic cluster. …Cartoon Network mobilizes discourses of nostalgia and classicism.”

While Cartoon Network transformed what “cartoon” meant in the 1990s and thus defined its brand image, USA Network’s brand image is similarly-linked to a generic category it has a primary role in defining. Mittell notes that Cartoon Network pulls in discourses about nostalgia and classicism. I would argue that discourse surrounding USA Network focuses on the plucky Characters, sunshine, inclusiveness, blue skies and escapism. The two cable networks tap into different feelings and interests, but their attempts to do so are similarly successful.

The final cross-series promotion television spot I want to discuss similarly exemplifies USA Network’s approach to formula and genre, and makes that approach more explicit. In 2009, the network smartly paired the debuting Royal Pains with its highest-rated original series, Burn
Notice. To advertise both series’ premiere date, USA Network aired a commercial that featured *Burn Notice* lead Michael Westen and his *Royal Pains* counterpart, Hank Lawson. In the spot, Hank is shown sitting near the beach, presumably at the Hamptons where *Royal Pains* takes place, with the sun shining down upon him as he opens a package he has just received. Inside the package are a letter and a few items, which the letter explains. The spot then cuts back and forth between Michael writing the letter and Hank reading it, as the former explains his purpose for writing in voice-over:

“Dear Doctor Hank: I understand you recently lost your job and had to find a new way to earn a living in an unfamiliar setting. I know exactly what that’s like so I have enclosed some things that might come in handy: Sunscreen, sunglasses and a block of C4. Because you never know when you’ll need a stable plastic explosive. Best of luck, your pal Michael Westen.”

This 40-second commercial is obviously meant to be funny, as Hank’s facial expressions suggest confusion and terror when Michael provides him with a block of C4 as off-beat, quirky music plays. However, Michael’s letter to Hank more or less serves as a quick announcement of USA Network’s narrative and Character formula. Most of the series’ lead Characters find themselves in an unfamiliar but sunny and gorgeous setting when their stories begin. They do not all lose their jobs, but many of them work in unofficial or somewhat illegal capacities to make a living. And although not all USA Network series include explosions (and would thus need C4), most of them do, so Michael’s letter to Hank is something of a welcoming invitation to join the stable of Characters. This advertisement suggests USA Network is trying to hammer home a definition of itself as a network, as a brand and also as a genre. In the 2004 and 2006 commercials, USA Network was less direct about its formula because it was still trying to build up its brand. But in
2009, after many subsequent successes such as *Psych*, *Burn Notice* and *In Plain Sight*, the network seemed more willing to trumpet its very specific – and recognizable – formula.

Yet again, this commercial can be construed to underscore the important values of the USA Network brand/genre: Character, escapism and inclusivity. The commercial again includes sunshine, blue skies and water, but also outwardly mentions that to be a part of the USA Network group a series and a Character will need sunscreen and sunglasses (and explosives). It is as if the commercial is allowing viewers to approve of Hank and *Royal Pains* based on the things Michael sends him. Hank positively responds to the sunglasses and the sunscreen and eventually seems convinced that he might actually need the C4, so to the audience, it looks as if he has passed “the USA Network test” of both Character and escapism. He lives in the right kind of place, he embraces the right kind of lifestyle and thus, will be able to provide entertaining stories the audience can escape into. And because this commercial serves as something of a test for Hank that the audience can indirectly participate in, it again tells the audience members that they are welcome. The spot lets the audience know that USA Network understands what kinds of things they like and what kind of people they are; so of course the viewers should get a say in who is and who is not a Character. Who would know better than them?

**USA Network’s self-defined and activated discourses: Single series television commercials**

USA Network does not only attempt to use cross-series commercials to define its formula as a genre. The network runs countless promotions for each of its series that help tie each series back to the larger genre. Additionally, USA Network has employed a few special promotions that tap even deeper into the audience’s psychological attraction to ideas of escapism, inclusiveness and Character. These two other branding approaches will not be discussed in great
detail, but deserve mention to paint a clear picture of how USA Network has elevated its formula into a genre through branding.

Although USA Network airs commercials for their series individually, those commercials tend to follow a similar template so that each series relates back to the overall brand. I see these series-specific commercials as less integral to the overall brand image, if only because the focus is more on the series being advertised than the overall USA Network brand/genre. However, the formula which these commercials follow is useful to discuss, albeit briefly. Much like the cross-series commercials, quick spots for individual series tend not to release many plot details and sometimes they barely relay enough information for a first-time viewer to know what to expect. In place of narrative explanation, the promos focus on glamour shots of both the series’ cast and the location where the series takes place. Those glamour shots are then intercut with snippets of scenes from actual episodes, but those scenes are not edited together in any logical order. A 2010 promo for the second season of *White Collar* fits this template well. The commercial is supposed to serve as a teaser for the series’ second season before it even begins, a process you would think would include trying to appeal to new viewers. However, little indication is given as to what *White Collar* is actually about. Instead, the commercial is filled with loud music blurtting out “I feel good” while it quickly cuts between various helicopter shots of the New York City skyline and star Matthew Bomer standing around in a nice suit. When the commercial does show scenes from the actual series, it relies on bits with Bomer’s Neal Caffrey kissing women, looking at women or being generally suspicious. There are a few hints about the series’ plot with a cut to FBI Agent Peter Burke asking Neal if they are on “the same side,” but there are no details about Neal’s possible dead girlfriend, his work-release program with the FBI or any other overarching
plot element. The commercial ends with random quotes from critics, hailing the series as “Entertaining as hell” and “Stylish,” and of course, flashing the “Characters Welcome” slogan.13

This *White Collar* commercial falls right in line with USA Network’s cross-series promotions and its overall genre-building. It defines the series based solely on its charismatic Character, a person who is shown to be stylish and seductive but also a little dangerous based on the authority character’s questioning of his motives. Neal is both impressive and relatable. Additionally, Peter’s question to Neal about being on the same side could be viewed as the series and network addressing the audience and their desires. USA Network wants to make sure the audience knows that Neal is a Character, but also that they too can be Characters with him by watching the series. The lack of plot details given and the constant beauty shots of New York City allow this commercial to help construct USA Network’s identity as a place for escapism, with programs that viewers are welcomed lose themselves in. Every series on USA Network, even the migrated-from-NBC *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, is promoted individually in this way to remind the viewers of the USA Network brand image. This promotional formula reminds viewers how to properly interpret the USA Network generic category. There are many more commercials that follow this very pattern and for the sake of length I will not discuss any of them further.

As a television network, USA Network’s television spots are likely going to be the primary way in which they try to establish the brand; however there are a number of other platforms that USA Network uses to promote itself. Print ads and social media accounts are generally less dynamic than television commercials and will therefore be discussed in shorter order, but I think these other platforms are worth discussing nevertheless so as to paint a larger picture of USA Network’s brand consistency and genre-activating processes. I will begin this
discussion with a focus on the various print advertisements USA Network has developed for its series during the “Characters Welcome” era.

**USA Network’s self-defined and activated discourses: Print poster ads**

Although the world is continuously moving more towards an all-digital environment, USA Network still produces print advertisements for its series that are not unlike one-sheet posters for films. These poster ads appear in print entertainment publications and are also easily found online during the press push for new seasons of USA Network’s series.  

Much like the pattern developed in the television spots, the network’s print advertisements follow a fairly standardized visual formula: One or two of the Characters highlighted against a blue sky backdrop, sometimes with obvious sunshine beating down on them.  

Font patterns exist as well, as every word outside of the series’ logos is presented in the same font (the same font USA Network uses across *everything*). Most of the print advertisements feature very little, if any, information about the series’ plots, with short, pithy taglines making up most of the word content.
80
As you can see in the posters above, this aesthetic and textual pattern is fairly consistent across the print advertisements for most of USA Network’s scripted fare. Each of these four posters features the series’ lead Characters front and center with a blue sky behind them and the sunshine beating down on them. Moreover, while the In Plain Sight Burn Notice and Royal Pains posters do feature a text tagline (“Welcome to Witness Protection. Now get lost.” “Sunny with a chance of espionage.,” “Just another day at the office.,” respectively), the text is very small and not at all dominant. Meanwhile, the Psych poster features no text tagline whatsoever, and instead relies on the recognition of the Characters themselves. The text does give some indication of what the three series are about but only in the most general sense. There are very few visual signifiers present in these posters that help describe the series’ narratives. The Characters are not doing anything of substance in the posters outside of posing, really. There is nothing in the Burn Notice poster that visually shows the audience that Michael and Fiona are spies, nor is there any information presented that suggests Psych’s Shawn and Gus are detectives. The Royal Pains poster hints at Hank Lawson’s medical practice with the classic doctor’s bag near his feet and In Plain Sight’s poster displays Mary’s Marshal badge. These are the most visually descriptive clues of all four posters.

The most important similarities these posters share are, of course, the inclusion of the blue skies, sunshine and appealing location. Though the Characters are all in the foreground of these ads, each one makes room for the blue sky and/or the sunshine. The Burn Notice and Royal Pains posters are especially focused on the blue skies behind the Characters and the Psych and In Plain Sight offerings are slightly more fixated on the beams of sunshine coming down on the Characters. Nevertheless, both blue skies and sunshine are underscored in each of the four posters. This is further highlighted by the fact that all the Characters but Psych’s Gus are wearing
or about to wear sunglasses. This is yet another visual motif signifying the importance of sunshine and general warmth within USA Network’s series. Finally, all four of these posters subtly celebrate the beautiful locations the Characters reside in. Visible are the skyline of Miami (Burn Notice), the beaches of the Hamptons (Royal Pains), the mountains of New Mexico (In Plain Sight) and the palm tree-heavy Santa Barbara (Psych). Again, the locations are less dominant in some of the posters than they are in others (Miami is just barely visible in the Burn Notice ad), but they are highlighted in some way across all four.

Individually and together, these posters help continue USA Network’s brand consistency into another media platform. Not only is everything, all the way down to the choice of font, similar to what is seen in the television spots, but these ads also importantly call attention to USA Network’s most important aesthetic and thematic concerns. The integral touchstones of USA Network’s visual pallet (blue skies, sunshine, beautiful locations) are present throughout. The inclusion of these elements further stresses summer and escapism that USA Network is trying to evoke with its brand image. The prominence of the lead Character(s) in each poster reinforces the overall thematic focus on them. Much like the television commercials discussed earlier, these print posters do not delve deep into the plot details of the series they are promoting. Instead, they rely almost completely on the attractive palpability of the Characters and the audience’s awareness of them. Again, as a product created by USA Network for the world to consume, these posters serve as yet another example of the network activating and defining its programming formula, visual style and thematic focus as a generic category. They exist to remind the audience of what USA Network is, not to really inform them. USA Network is confident enough in the penetration of their brand image that the network does not have to provide concrete information; audiences will generally know all they need to. By playing on
these assumptions about its brand image and programming, USA Network’s work continues to
discursively construct the new genre.

USA Network’s self-defined and activated discourses: Web sites and social media

Television commercials and print posters are admittedly important in the brand-building
process, but in the 21st century, web sites and social media accounts are just as, if not more,
integral. Though the television commercials and print posters serve as promotion for series or the
network as a whole, social media accounts and web sites are something slightly different. These
platforms certainly help promote the programs and the network, but they also lead to a more in-
depth experience for interested fans. Obviously, the hope is that these extra touch-points will
further ingrain the brand image in the minds of viewers. In his work on Nickelodeon and Cartoon
Network, Kevin S. Sadler calls these additional branding processes “brand extensions” and notes
that they are paramount for a brand’s survival, especially in today’s competitive cable television
market.16 I think we can safely identify social media and web content as brand extensions. In the
television world, USA Network has been one of the most savvy users and producers of online
and social media content, further disseminating its brand image to audiences and therefore
improving brand equity. USA Network’s official web site and its related series’ sites extend the
brand image into the digital area very well. Like any network web site, USA Network’s web site
features a daily schedule, episode information, photos, video clips, games, message boards, etc.
However, there are a number of specific touches that make USANetwork.com particularly USA
Network-like. The homepage is unsurprisingly drenched in light blues and whites and similarly
present is the same font from the network’s various commercials and print posters.17 Both the
main USA Network hub and the various series web sites include content given the “Character”
moniker. The main page features a slew of free games in the “Character Arcade,” while each
series web site includes a “Characters” informational section and a mainframe of social media activity known as “Character Chatter.” Although each of the series has its own theme color (Burn Notice is orange, for example\textsuperscript{18}), the design, layout and font selection is the same across all of USA Network’s series – which is to say it is also identical to the main USA Network page. Finally, a number of the series web sites include special sections that highlight the glories of their respective locations, such as “Kate’s Guide to San Francisco” found on Fairly Legal’s page. Each of these elements on USA Network’s web site fit well into the visual consistency of the network’s brand image and its emphasis on Character and escape. When users visit the web pages, they not only take in a wholly coherent and connected experience across each series’ individual space, they are quickly reminded of the touchstones of USA Network’s brand in the colors, the Characters and the escapist locations. Again, this consistency is obviously intentional on USA Network’s part, making the web sites part of the larger brand-building and genre-activating process.

Though USA Network’s official web site is a well-constructed digital space, it is the use of social media that has garnered the network positive attention. USA Network was one of the early adopters of social media application Twitter, as the network created accounts for all of its series and itself in early 2009. Discounting the recently-new series Suits, Necessary Roughness and Fairly Legal, all of USA Network’s current series have Twitter accounts with at least 6,000 followers, with many of them garnering between 20,000 and 30,000 followers as of July 19, 2011.\textsuperscript{19} USA Network’s team uses these accounts to remind viewers of upcoming episodes, promote DVD releases and actor appearances and to operate contests and giveaways. USA Network also has another presence on Twitter in the form of VP of Program Research Ted Linhart. Since early 2010, Linhart has been tweeting from the @TedOnTV account with “inside
scoop” on the inner-workings of USA Network and its programming. In a July 2010 interview with Smart Blogs, Linhart noted that network president Bonnie Hammer and head of original programming Jeff Wachtel pushed for an inside account of the network on Twitter and eventually Linhart was selected to fill this role. USA Network pushed its Twitter use even further in June 2011 when it was announced that a Covert Affairs story would develop first on Twitter. Known as a “Tweetcast,” the story followed interagency chatter of the series’ characters and eventually dovetailed into a plot from an actual episode of Covert Affairs.

USA Network’s use of Twitter is especially effective in building its brand image and equity, but it also connects back to the brand/genre’s larger touchstones. The series Twitter accounts highlight certain consistencies of the USA Network brand image. Each series’ Twitter page reflects that series’ primary color (Psych is green, for example) and each of the accounts include similarly-framed logos as their avatars. The Twitter accounts also direct back to the series’ official web sites, extending the connection between the two digital platforms. This keeps the USA Network brand image consistent in yet another space that the audience encounters it. Moreover, the series accounts theoretically allow the audience to feel “closer” to the series and its stars. This is developed further through the “Character Chatter” platform mentioned earlier, which pulls in all tweets and discussion about a specific series into one space. Character Chatter allows audiences to feel a closer sense of proximity to their favorite series and also be embraced as Characters themselves. So much of USA Network’s brand image is based on connecting to the audience’s desire to be identified as exceptional or special, and social media and Character Chatter is yet another impactful way the network accomplishes that.

The @TedOnTV account is something of a social media Character in his own right. Linhart is an admitted lover of television, which makes him instantly relatable to the other USA
Network fans on Twitter. Even though Linhart just a person doing a job his bosses asked of him, the @TedOnTV persona is something more. Just as Michael Westen is adept at odd but believable accents, @TedOnTV is skilled at providing “inside scoop” on his network’s programming. The information Linhart provides from his Twitter account is signed off on by USA Network executives, but his work as @TedOnTV is still something of a performance. @TedOnTV’s “inside scoops” make him an outlaw-like Character within the stuffy realms of a media conglomerate. Therefore, @TedOnTV is easily relatable and reachable, yet also a special Character that perfectly aligns with the USA Network brand image. His work not only gives the audience an “in” to the world of the network, but also positions him as a Character within that world, accentuating the importance of both Character and inclusiveness. Finally, the Covert Affairs Tweetcast also reinforces the bonds between USA Network’s fictional Characters and those in the audience. By creating a story that unfolds only on Twitter, USA Network is implicitly telling its viewers that Characters use Twitter. If you are a USA Network fan using Twitter, you already know this and you can be part of the story with all the other Characters. If you are not using Twitter, you be better get there so you can follow along establish yourself as one. The Tweetcast thus expands the network’s social media profile, and simultaneously strengthens the theoretical bonds between the network, its series and the audience. This improves brand equity and reminds viewers what to expect when they think of USA Network, which again reinforces USA Network’s place as a new, “different” generic category.

**USA Network’s self-defined and activated discourses: Promotional events**

Because USA Network has succeeded so well with the “Characters Welcome” campaign, the network has been able to build upon it in interesting ways for “special” events that smartly reaffirm the pillars of the brand image. More importantly, these special campaigns permit USA
Network to focus more on the psychological values that are implied created by the brand/genre. For the last few years, USA Network has organized the Character Approved Awards. This campaign aims to celebrate the “people, places and things that are positively impacting American culture.” USA Network finds real people they believe represent the ideals of their fictional stars, holds an awards banquet for them which all sorts of celebrities attend and then creates a television special and web site in their honor – hosted by an actor from one of USA Network’s main series. These real individuals are given USA Network’s “Character Seal of Approval.” The television special highlights all 10 winners by discussing what those people have done to win the honor and then the Characters Approved web site features individual pages with links to work, charities and more. 2010’s winners included high-profile artists like Green Day, directors Kathryn Bigelow and Nora Ephron, but also lesser-known individuals such as restaurant owner Dan Barber and Kiva.org co-founder Jessica Jackley.

The Character Approved Awards gives USA Network an opportunity to extend a successful branding campaign further, but it also emphasizes the emotional values audiences presumably get from the brand. I have already established that USA Network’s presentation of Characters invites the people at home to feel both like they can relate to those fictional individuals and also recognize the Character within themselves; the Character Approved Awards takes that idea one step further. Although a few of the winners are popular culture icons, most are “normal” people doing “abnormal” things. This tells viewers that they could win this award if they were out there in the world doing things that “positively impact” society. The Characters are not only quirky and skilled in particular ways; they use those quirks and skills to help individuals around them. The Characters Approved Awards let the network underscore that real people can, and should, be like the fictional Characters USA Network develops. The Character Approved
Awards suggest that USA Network is like the Characters its honors: Fun and unconventional, but well-intentioned and respectable. And if the viewers think that they too are Characters (like USA Network’s fictional representatives), they will perhaps be inspired by the network’s attempts to do something substantial in the world as well. This is not only smart branding on USA Network’s part, but it is also furthers the definition and interpretation of the “USA Network genre” through extratextual bounds. Finally, the Character Approved Awards and their focus on positive cultural impacts likely help the network even more equity for the brand.

Recently, USA Network started the Characters Unite campaign. This multimedia campaign “represents a movement committed to combating intolerance, prejudice and discrimination, and to promoting greater acceptance and mutual respect.” In the public service announcements for the Characters Unite drive, a number of USA Network’s actors are shown saying that they “Took the pledge,” an online donation drive fighting against the injustices mentioned above. Interestingly, while the public service announcements include many of USA Network’s major stars, there is no indication if they are supposed to be in or out of Character. The focus is on the message and not any sort of promotion for the actor’s various series; yet, no one is mentioned by name and there are no name cards at the bottom of the screen identifying the individuals (either by their real or Character names). The individuals speak directly into the camera, to make sure the audience recognizes the weight of the message. On the Characters United web site, the photos of the actors are obviously promotional photos of them in-Character, partially confusing matters. And of course, the public service announcements and the website still spotlight the “Characters Welcome” slogan. This operation, though slightly complicated because of the blurring between character and actor, still serves as an example of USA Network’s attempts to try to take advantage of the values the audience already attaches to the
network. Here, much like with the Character Approved Awards, USA Network shows the audience that even individuals (and by extension, the network) who are in conflict with authority and do not play by the rules can still do the right thing in the end. USA Network’s Characters know right from wrong and they are not afraid to make sure the audience as well. The Characters United campaign also plays into audiences’ desire to be Characters themselves. With the individuals talking directly into the camera, it is almost as if they are challenging viewers to live by the standards of a Character. This quasi-guilt trip tells viewers exactly where USA Network stands on these issues and also where the network thinks said viewers should similarly stand.

Finally, like the Characters Approved Awards, these public service announcements further improve USA Network’s brand equity. Supporting well-intentioned causes is an easy, simple way for a brand to improve its standing with consumers, and USA Network accomplishes that goal here.

The Characters Approved Awards and the Characters Unite campaign are the most well-known of USA Network’s special service promotions. However, in recent years, the network has developed a few more that are at least worth mentioning briefly. In 2009 and 2010, USA Network partnered with television journalist Tom Brokaw for two projects. The first Brokaw-led project American Character saw him drive across the country on “historic Highway 50” (which the web site calls “the backbone of America”) to capture the changing American culture. American Character aired as a one-hour special in January of 2010 and through a series of vignettes between other USA Network content. Around the same time, Brokaw hosted a “Characters Unite National Town Hall” event that brought various leaders from key sectors of society to discuss the similar cultural changes. Psych actor Dulé Hill also attended this event.

Both of these events further publicized the Characters Unite campaign and linked USA Network
to the United States population. Brokaw’s *American Character* project highlighted various “real people” (or Characters, we could say) who were adjusting to the contemporary economic realities. This again reinforces that USA Network wants to connect its fictional Characters with the real Characters out there in the world. Finally, USA Network sponsored the Character Project, a series of eight short independent films or documentaries positioned to “celebrate America’s Character.” According to the press release, the films in the Character Project are part of “an ongoing artistic initiative with the mission to explore extraordinary people, from all walks of life, who make this country unique.” Much like the Brokaw-led *American Character* content, the Character Project connects USA Network to even more productions that celebrate to “Character,” but also highlight the stories of real world Characters.

With these special service campaigns, USA Network accomplishes two primary goals. First, the service initiatives give the network an opportunity to extend the brand’s goodwill further, and hopefully induce social change. Second, they, of course, associate the brand’s touchstones with that goodwill, which only further reinforces (and positively so) USA Network’s image. Although the Characters Approved Awards, the *American Character* series and the Character Project do not necessarily include fictional Characters and the Characters United campaign blurs the line between actor/Character, each of these special service promotions still recall and emphasize the traits of the lead Character and further evoke the USA Network brand’s connection to “real” people. Real or fictional, these brand extensions focus on those do good and help others, while being comfortable with their distinctive personalities. These extensions allow USA Network to do some good, but also remind those who support these causes of what USA Network is all about. Finally, each of these special programs has come with its own round of public relations and media coverage, putting the USA Network name and brand image out there
in the minds of viewers and consumers. These service programs are not directly connected to the scripted content USA Network airs, but they are thematically linked due to the focus on “Character,” with a special concentration on real-life Characters who are welcomed into network’s world. By creating these special interest projects, USA Network further establishes the discourse surrounding the network and the brand image, and therefore works to activate and define the new generic category.

**USA Network’s self-defined and activated discourses: Scheduling**

Another element of the USA Network brand/genre worth discussing is program scheduling. Mittell argues that scheduling is one of the two primary ways in which industrial forces can work towards activating and defining a genre. In his discussion of scheduling practices and their importance to genre, Mittell writes:

> “Scheduling practices organize programs for audiences and often communicate generic assumptions (like daytime versus late-night talk shows). Both placing programs within larger temporal blocks (Saturday morning, late-night, ‘family hour’ and stringing together programs in a block (ABCS’s TGIF line-up, UPN’s night of African-American sitcoms) use genres to reach specific audiences, working to constitute the genre by linking it with particular assumptions. 

> …[S]cheduling practices are one of the primary ways the television industry provides generic frameworks to situate programs.”

The arguments Mittell makes about scheduling are all valid, but there is one part of scheduling that he fails to mention: seasonality. Although television has traditionally operated on a season schedule that takes place between September and May, the growing success of cable over last decade has changed that. Cable networks looking to avoid competing with the broadcast
networks during the “official” television season realized that the best time to air new programming would be during the summer months, when the broadcasters were in repeats. HBO is well-known for this scheduling approach on pay cable and USA Network has been especially adept at implementing the strategy on basic cable as well. Mittell argues that scheduling practices help create generic assumptions, in that most audiences assume to know the differences between “daytime television,” “primetime television” and “late-night television.” Obviously, there are hundreds of different things on in the “daytime,” from soap operas and talk shows to repeats of primetime programming and live sporting events, but the general assumption put forth in the discourse is that “daytime television” carries very specific connotations. But just as there are expected differences between “daytime” and “primetime,” there are distinctive thoughts on what constitutes programs that air during the traditional season and those that air during the summer. Summer television is generally thought to be full of lightweight, frivolous or simply awful programming that the audience does not have to pay as much attention to. A June 2011 CNN article calling summer television “guilty summer viewing” or the New York Times’ Bill Carter noting “If it’s summer on network television, somebody is probably being humiliated.” are typical comments made about the summer season. There are obvious exceptions to this assumption, as the prestige cable networks like HBO and AMC continue to air their most critically-acclaimed dramas in the summer, but the negative connotations of summer television still exist.

USA Network has not shied away from these assumptions about summer television, but instead has fully embraced them. The network’s programming formula and brand image in the “Characters Welcome” era so closely align with the presumptions about summer television that it appears USA Network and summer is a perfect match. Dating all the way back to Monk, USA
Network has premiered the majority of its scripted series in the summer season and with little exception, they have all been hits in those timeslots. If the assumptions about summer television are that it provides lightweight, fun and escapist television, USA Network’s programming formula and brand image focused on blue skies, sunshine, beautiful viewings, etc. fit those assumptions perfectly. One could argue that after USA Network saw some of its initial 21st century original series (*Monk, Dead Zone*) succeed in the summer, the network started to develop series that closely aligned with the audience’s general assumptions about the season. USA Network series like *Burn Notice* and *Royal Pains* feel like the most obvious examples of this. Whether intentional or not, it is clear that USA Network has worked hard to have its programming formula and brand image be synonymous with summer television, or as Myles McNutt calls it, USA Network has achieved “season synergy” with summer.\(^{34}\)

Even though USA Network’s success in summer has been heavily chronicled by the entertainment media, the network is still working to tie the formula/brand/genre to the summer season.\(^{35}\) In May and June of 2011, USA Network held outdoor screenings of all its new summer premieres in swanky sections of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, complete with a white- and blue-themed summer cabaña layout.\(^{36}\) Similarly, USA Network’s summer 2011 ad campaign further connected the brand to the season, noting that USA Network was a “beginning of summer thing” and that 2011 would be the “biggest summer ever.”\(^{37}\) By linking its programming formula and brand image to the summer season through aesthetic and thematic similarities, USA Network yet again discursively separates itself from the rest of television. USA Network taps into the critic and audience assumptions about the summer season and helps those groups link its programming and brand image with said seasonal assumptions. The network organizes its programs by seasonality and used that “seasonal synergy” further solidify the USA Network
generic category. Not only do audiences and critics know what the USA Network genre is, they generally know when series in that genre are going to be hitting the airwaves, not unlike how those groups can assume that a glut of horror films will be released near Halloween or romantic comedies for Valentine’s Day.

Of course, not every single new episode of a USA Network original series airs in the summer. Most of the network’s programs debut in the summer and then air a handful of episodes during the more traditional fall season. And in recent years USA Network has premiered brand-new series such as *White Collar* and *Fairly Legal* in the fall and winter respectively. Interestingly, the two series to originally debut in the fall are set in locations that are less known for the sandy beaches and blue skies (New York and San Francisco, respectively). This suggests that perhaps USA Network prefers to air is most summery series (such as *Burn Notice* and *Royal Pains*) in the summer and wants to evoke slightly different seasonal synergy with other series.

Despite the weather differences for most of the country between June and November, USA Network has still played up the summer seasonality when marketing new episodes in the fall and winter. For example, the network’s early 2011 campaign came with the tagline, “Winter gets hotter.”

However, one curious point worth noting is that generally, the episodes airing in the fall do not garner the same kind of high ratings that the summer offerings do. For example, the episodes of *Burn Notice*’s third season that aired in the summer of 2009 averaged around 6 million viewers, whereas those that aired in the fall averaged closer to 4 million viewers. Clearly, the tougher competition that comes with the traditional fall season accounts for some of the dip in ratings, but we could also posit that the audience’s expectations about what USA Network programming is and when it airs actually worked against *Burn Notice* in this case.
Perhaps audiences did not have as much time to watch the series live in November as they did in June; or perhaps they were ready for something “more” than just the escapist fare that USA Network presumably offers. In any event, the declining ratings across seasons further exemplifies that USA Network is identified primarily with the escapist summer season.

**USA Network’s self-defined and activated discourses: Decision-maker interviews**

One final platform that USA Network uses to further its brand image is through the interviews the various members of the network’s management do with the entertainment or business media. Most of the time, these interviews do not include a lot of overt, shameless plugs for certain series, but former network president Bonnie Hammer and current president of programming Jeff Wachtel often emphasize the major ideals of the brand. Their subtle brand management within interviews reminds or introduces readers to the ways of USA Network and serves as yet another example of a media platform that the network has advantageously used.

The following are short excerpts from various stories and interviews on USA Network from the past few years:

> “USA seems to understand that viewers may want straightforwardly lighter fare in addition to their regular diet of harder-core entertainment. ‘Life is hard enough to live,’ Ms. [Bonnie] Hammer told me [reporter Jordan C. Hirsch]. ‘People don't need more stress. We're popular because they want fun escapism.’”

> “The shows pair their visual candy with humor-laden drama and protagonists who, in Ms. Hammer's words, ‘are flawed, but not in a dark, negative way.’”
“Most significantly, however, Mr. [Jeff] Wachtel says the shows were consciously designed to strike a chord with the zeitgeist of post-September 11th America. ‘Following 9-11,’ he notes, ‘audiences were worried about the threat of terrorism and war on several fronts.’ As much as they desire an escape, viewers also seek to identify with a certain type of hero: the kind of people who, despite personal faults, "run toward the burning building while everyone else runs away."”

“USA greenlights only shows that go through what network executives call a ‘brand filter.’ That means nothing gets the go-ahead unless it is ‘aspirational, blue skies, upbeat, optimistic and character-driven,’ says Bonnie Hammer, chairman of NBC Universal Cable Entertainment and Cable Studios.”

Again, these quotes are from only two Wall Street Journal stories, both of which are from the last two years. However, there are a number of other stories and interviews that Hammer and Wachtel have participated in where they have said things similar to the statements above. This brief survey of USA Network executive quotes shows us how adept the network is at promoting its brand image. In these four excerpts, we have nearly all the network’s brand keywords: “escapism,” “flawed,” “escape,” “hero,” “faults,” “blue skies,” “upbeat,” “optimistic” and “character-driven.” Moreover, Hammer outwardly acknowledges that the network only picks programs that fit their “brand filter,” which is slightly tinkered phrasing for “brand image.” Presumably, interviews in the Wall Street Journal are going to be seen less than constantly-running commercials or one-sheet print posters, but USA Network uses the publication to yet again shape the discourse about the network, brand and generic category.
The fact that the “Characters Welcome” slogan and its related visual and thematic markers are still around seven years after its creation suggests that USA Network’s has succeeded in developing its brand image. Across all platforms, USA Network’s brand image is upheld with rigorous consistency. From the most important elements, like the blue sky- and sunshine-focused visual palette and emphasis on Characters, to the smaller elements, such as the font, all images, colors, styles and feelings are connected in the USA Network world. When audiences experience USA Network through television commercials, they recognize the USA Network-ness of those spots. When they flip through the latest *Entertainment Weekly* and see a poster ad for *Royal Pains*, audiences recognize the USA Network-ness of the art. When they browse the web or connect with the network and its series on Twitter, audiences see the USA Network-ness of it all. The same holds true when the network introduces new special service events and even when the seasons turn and the weather heats up. There is very little question that USA Network has a consistent, coherent and easily consumable brand image. Following Mittell’s view of genre, we can again identify all of this work as part of more than just brand-building, it is also genre-building, -activating and -defining in the extratextual spaces outside of the programming itself. USA Network floods the market with programming and branding content, spurring on the activation and definition of the new generic category. The network works across all platforms to shape the discourse surrounding everything it produces, from original scripted programming to the promotional materials related to that programming. As previously mentioned, Mittell identifies branding as a primary tool of the industry forces for genre-activation and the success of USA Network’s “Characters Welcome” branding campaign reinforces Mittell’s argument nicely. The visual pillars of the USA Network genre are easily identifiable in the blue skies, sunshine and the Character. And, as a genre, USA Network
perpetuates values such as escape and inclusivity to its audience. Furthermore, the brand image further underscores the links between the network’s visual and thematic concentrations and the programming formula. For USA Network, brand is genre. Or at least USA Network wants it to be. Recall that Mittell notes three groups help shape generic categories: industrial forces, critics and audiences. Therefore, without quality acknowledgement and acceptance (positive or negative) of critics and audiences, USA Network work as an industry force to activate and define the USA Network genre is all for not. The following chapter will explore how critics and audiences have responded to USA Network and how those responses have shaped the discourse about the network and generic category.

NOTES

11 And one could even argue that USA Network “mobilizes” discourses of nostalgia as well, considering their formula and brand image has connections to the kind of light television dramedies that aired on broadcast networks in the ’70s and ’80s, particularly on NBC.
A few recent posters have integrated a new wrinkle in the aesthetic formula of the poster. Instead of the blue sky backdrop, these other posters feature a shiny white background with a slight hint of sunshine. Recent White Collar, Psych and Fairly Legal posters reflect this change, but not all series’ posters do, which makes them exceptions to the larger rule.


See “@WhiteCollarUSA,” “@BurnNotice_USA,” “@RoyalPains_USA,” “@InPlainSightUSA,” “@Psych_USA,” “@USA_LawOrderCI,” “@MonkUSA,” “@CovertAffairs” and “@FairlyLegal, Twitter (accessed 6 February 2012).


19 See “@WhiteCollarUSA,” “@BurnNotice_USA,” “@RoyalPains_USA,” “@InPlainSightUSA,” “@Psych_USA,” “@USA_LawOrderCI,” “@MonkUSA,” “@CovertAffairs” and “@FairlyLegal, Twitter (accessed 6 February 2012).


McNutt, “The Rigidity of Seasonal Synergy.”


Hirsch, “USA’s Magic Formula for Making Hits.”

Hirsch, “USA’s Magic Formula for Making Hits.”

Chozick, “The Happy-Time Network.”
CHAPTER IV. “WHY DOES USA KEEP MAKING THE SAME SHOW?”: SURVEYING CRITIC AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO THE USA NETWORK GENRE

While the previous chapter explored how USA Network, as a representative of “the industry,” worked to activate and define the “USA Network genre,” that sort of top-down process is not the only part of the genre-activating process. Jason Mittell argues that three primary groups play a role in the creation of genre through discursive means: the industry, critics and audiences.\(^1\) The process of discursive genre activation requires more than just top-down definition by industrial forces. In the case of USA Network, this means thinking about more than just the network’s brand image and considering those other two groups. Mittell suggests that to really exist, genres must be interpreted and evaluated as such. He argues:

“Genres also serve as sites of interpretive consistency, as generic interpretations posit core meanings for any given genre – police dramas as conservative rituals of assurance, horror as a mean to cope with social anxieties. Additionally, interpretation and classification often merge in practice, with central meanings serving as definitional attributes for most genre analysts – the western can be defined by its meaningful opposition between nature and civilization. Finally genres are activated in systems of cultural value, with nearly every genre located on the highbrow/lowlbrow axis – medical dramas are positioned as more socially valued and intrinsically ‘better’ than soap operas by nearly anyone expressing an opinion.”\(^2\)

I see audiences and critics as most responsible for the interpretation and evaluation of a genre. Mittell argues for a more fluid process wherein all three groups can play a role in any and all of the three “parts” of the genre discourse. It is easier to discuss how audiences work to define,
interpret and evaluate generic categories in a chapter that is singularly focused on audience activity as Mittell does in his book. However, instead of building individual chapters around a single group and exploring how that group defines, interprets and evaluates genres, my focus is on determining how all three of the groups impact the discursive life of one genre. Therefore, it seems useful to assign industrial forces, audiences and critics specific roles in this process. In the case of the USA Network generic category, I see the industrial forces as playing the most crucial role in definition and hopefully I have sufficiently described how USA Network, acting as an industrial force, has worked to define this new generic category. Identifying specific roles for audiences and critics is more difficult, if only because interpretation and evaluation are so closely related. Ultimately, although both groups do play in a role in both interpretation and evaluation, I argue that audiences play a primary role in the evaluation process whereas critics work as integral agents of the interpretation process. In his chapter on the audience of daytime talk shows, Mittell notes that “evaluation” appears to be “crucial” for audiences because it is tied to taste hierarchies and distinctions, elements that allow them to create a certain kind of identity based on those tastes and distinctions. I am interested in exploring taste and distinction in the viewership of USA Network’s audience and so tying audiences and evaluation together is a logical choice. And again, although Mittell argues for a more fluctuating method, applying some structure to his work fits my goals best. Therefore, following pages will discuss audiences’ role in interpretation of the USA Network generic category and critics’ role in the evaluation of it.

For USA Network, the top-down activation and definition of the generic category is not entirely explicit. USA Network decision-makers like Bonnie Hammer and Jeff Wachtel have never said in an interview, “We think our programming constitutes a new genre of television!” However, the most important element of Mittell’s view of genre is that they are not inherently
found within texts or explicitly created by any one entity; they are instead defined, interpreted
and evaluated through discourse. Therefore, to truly become a genre, USA Network’s
programming and branding has to be interpreted and evaluated by audiences and critics as a
genre. I would argue that industrial forces still play the largest role in the discourse surrounding
a genre, if only because they have such expansive resources to shape what audiences consume
and what critics discuss, but audiences and critics do play an integral role in the genre activation
process. Without the specific response of these two groups, the USA Network genre could not
exist. The interpretation and evaluation of USA Network’s programming and brand by audiences
and critics has helped make the existence of the USA Network genre more possible.

Inclusivity and enjoyment: The USA Network brand promise

As discussed in the previous chapter, USA Network discursively promotes a few primary
ideas through its brand image: Sunshine-soaked, blue-sky summertime escapism and the
eccentric but heroic Character found inside the fictional worlds of USA Network programming
and within the viewers at home. Through the “Characters Welcome” branding campaign, USA
Network is inviting audiences into their world where everyone, fictional or real, is offbeat and
special, and where everyone can have a good time while enjoying the beautiful locations.
Moreover, the network embraces the formulaic nature of its programming and brand in a number
of ways, from putting its Characters together in commercials (creating another formulaic pattern,
in this case for its promotional materials) to the quotes provided by network executives in
various stories. In a 2010 interview with the Wall Street Journal, Burn Notice creator and
showrunner Matt Nix noted that, “USA shows don't purport to be anything other than enjoyable,
hopefully intelligent TV. There's an audience for that kind of unapologetic television.” This
statement from Nix sums up the network’s view of itself, its branding and its programming. USA
Network is not entirely interested in making “great” television in the vein of HBO’s *The Sopranos* or AMC’s *Mad Men*, but they also do not want to be known for making dreck that is comparable to VH1’s *Rock of Love*. USA Network likes to exist right in the middle of the quality spectrum. In his discussion of HBO’s branding and audience-organizing practices, Avi Santo argues that:

> “HBO must continuously promote discourses of ‘quality’ and ‘exclusivity’ as central to the subscription experience. These discourses aim to brand not only HBO, but its audience as well. In this manner, pay cable sells cultural capital to its subscribers, who are elevated above the riffraff that merely consume television.”

Similarly, Amanda Lotz explored how HBO’s brand image promotes certain ideals to the audience:

> “HBO now brands its network with the strategic and contrary slogan, ‘It’s not TV, It’s HBO;’ an attempt to differentiate the network’s brand by distancing HBO content from stereotypic notions of television as a ‘low art’ form providing the ‘least objectionable programming’ – assumption heavily weighted with cultural capital that affords assessments of higher quality forms with less accessibility.”

Looking at this analysis of HBO’s branding campaign provides a useful comparison for USA Network’s very different brand image. As Santo notes, HBO underscores two major ideas with its brand and its programming: quality and exclusivity. These maneuvers position HBO in opposition to typical television, which as Lotz notes, is thought of as low art. As both scholars acknowledge, HBO’s emphasis of exclusivity brands the audience as well, making them feel like cultural tastemakers who embrace the best, which “not TV” has to offer. This ultimately creates a form of cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu argues that cultural capital stems from certain kinds of
knowledge, skill, education, and advantages a person has. Armed with this knowledge, skill, education, etc., a person has not only more cultural capital, but a presumably higher status in society. Bourdieu argues that taste distinctions play a large role in the development of social identities (and thus the constitution of cultural capital). Mittell ties ideas of taste, distinction and cultural capital to genre, arguing that genres are one of the most predominant ways in which audiences “discern, discriminate, and distinguish” between media products. For Mittell, the way that we discursively organize and stratify genres is representative of taste-making and ultimately, identity-making. Preference of complex dramas over soap operas means valuing one genre more than the other, but also theoretically helps an individual obtain more cultural capital (depending on the context). So someone who likes gritty, complex HBO programming is going to be looked upon as having more cultural capital than someone who prefers MTV’s 16 and Pregnant or Teen Mom.

But while HBO bestows “quality” and “exclusivity” onto its audience, USA Network promises different ideals and capital. Instead of focusing on exclusivity like HBO, USA Network offers the exact opposite: inclusivity. HBO’s slogan includes the word “not,” which automatically positions the pay cable giant and its audience against something. We could say that HBO is playing on the general desire to be better than others (and thus gain more cultural capital than them as well). USA Network’s slogan includes the word “welcome,” which does something else entirely. The network invites the audience in to its sunny, blue-sky world and plays on our basic desire to be accepted, no matter what our quirks, tics or faults are. Moreover, instead of promising “quality” like HBO, USA Network generally wants to offer only “enjoyable” and “unapologetic” television (if we use the words of Burn Notice showrunner Matt Nix). USA Network strives to provide a certain brand of fun, middle-of-the-road entertainment
that can be viewed without much thought. If there is anything the network opposes, it is the kind of exclusivity and distinction that HBO programming supposedly offers. USA Network is a warm summer day with a massive beach party that everyone is invited to, no matter your class, quirks or tastes. Everyone has a Character within them just waiting to come out, and hopefully USA Network can inspire them to do so. Thus, if HBO promises quality and exclusivity, USA Network promises enjoyment and inclusivity. Of course, these views of both HBO and USA Network are powered by interpretations of their branding strategies and their attempts to organize audiences around certain ideals. To determine how audiences and critics respond to these branding measures, it is important to survey actual responses.

**Genre interpretation: Surveying critical response to the USA Network generic category**

The second group that plays a role in the discursive creation and sustaining of a generic category is critics. Mittell’s use of the term “critics” is vague – perhaps purposefully so – and it is important to note how I am integrating it into my work. We can extend the definition of critic to mean two slightly different things: Television critics, those who review and interpret television for a living, and other journalists/writers/reporters that produce stories about television and the media, but without the subjective reviewing that comes with being a traditional critic. Mittell acknowledges the role of the non-traditional critics by noting that “The coverage of television in the press is a central realm of generic operation,” with publications like *TV Guide* serving as the primary circulators of generic labels and discussion.11 This specific and expanded definition of critic will allow me to provide a larger and broader scope of responses to the USA Network brand and its programming. It also seems useful to note what I mean by “interpret.” One of the jobs of the television critic (and to a lesser extent, the media journalist) is to describe the themes, values and meanings of television programs. We could say that media critics provide
their professional interpretation of an episode or a series and start a conversation while media journalists report on the trends in interpretation that exist in the discourse surrounding a series or network. Taken together, the television critic and the media reporter create a larger discourse surrounding a text, one that audiences can respond to in comments sections, message boards or social media.

If we are to assume that genres are created discursively by these three disparate, yet connected groups, there are complexities that arise between the industry and the other two groups. Although industrial forces can work to develop and define genres and organize audiences and critics around them, there is no guarantee that this will actually happen. The response, especially the positive response of critics and media members, is fairly crucial in the creation and success of a new generic category. Fortunately for USA Network, the response from the media has been affirmative in two ways. Not only have critics and journalists reacted fairly positively to the content itself, they have acknowledged that USA Network has established itself with a very specific formula and branding campaign and therefore carved out a corner of the television world for itself. I will be tackling each of these positive responses separately, beginning with the reviews of various USA Network series from television critics. I have selected two television critics/critic groups as my representative interpreters of USA Network’s programming. The first is Alan Sepinwall, the most-respected and perhaps most famous television critic, known for establishing episodic-based criticism of television online. I will also be drawing upon the reviews of those who write for The A.V. Club’s TV Club. The A.V. Club is the Onion’s completely-serious (albeit sarcastic) entertainment publication. There, a regular stable of 15-20 writers produce daily pieces on television. Like Sepinwall, the TV Club is well-respected in media criticism circles and therefore worth surveying. Instead of providing content from these
critics’ countless reviews of all of USA Network’s series, I will talk about the critical response to series very briefly and then provide a few sentences of specific evidence to back up my summary. This will provide a sufficient, though not exhaustive look at how highly-regarded television critics have responded to and interpreted USA Network programming in the “Characters Welcome” era.

General critical response to USA Network’s programs has been positive, albeit not overwhelmingly so. *Burn Notice* is likely the most respected series in the eyes of critics and is also the one known as the representative beacon of USA Network’s style and brand. In his January 2009 review of the second season finale, Sepinwall called *Burn Notice* “outstanding,” and noted that he was “incredibly satisfied” by the series.\(^{13}\) Sepinwall gave *Burn Notice* a spot on his top 10 series of 2008.\(^{14}\) Similarly, in *The A.V. Club*’s first review of *Burn Notice* in July 2008, Noel Murray gave the second season premiere a grade of A-minus, and bequeathed later season two episodes grades no lower than a B. As of June 26, 2011, *The A.V. Club* has reviewed 43 individual episodes of *Burn Notice* and only three have garnered letter grades below B-minus.\(^{15}\) If *Burn Notice* is the apex of USA Network quality, *In Plain Sight* and *White Collar* are likely part of the second tier in the minds of critics. In his May 2008 review of *In Plain Sight*’s pilot episode, Sepinwall said that “*In Plain Sight* is a definite for any summer TV To-Watch list; don't cross it off until you've seen at least one.”\(^{16}\) A June 2011 A-minus review of the season three premiere of *White Collar* saw *The A.V. Club*’s Kenny Herzog note that:

“The schemers behind *White Collar* appear to have gotten the memo that, while its network welcomes more characters than Noah’s Ark, keeping their ensemble airtight…will keep this resurgent show on long enough to figure out where it goes next.”\(^{17}\)
Most of USA Network’s other recent offerings—*Monk, Psych, Royal Pains* and *Covert Affairs*—fall somewhere just below the prestige of *White Collar* and *In Plain Sight*, depending on the critic or even the season. Without belaboring the point too much, recent *A.V. Club* reviews of *Psych, Covert Affairs* and *Royal Pains* all feature “good, but not great” letter grades like B, B-minus and C. Even the least-respected series of the USA Network stable, the relatively new *Fairly Legal*, was given a C grade by *The A.V. Club*’s Todd VanDerWerff with the qualifier that “there’s plenty of room here to grow.” From this short survey, we can see that critics generally like, but do not love USA Network’s scripted offerings. Sepinwall and *The A.V. Club* staffers do not write about USA Network series as in-depth or as regularly as they do programs like *Mad Men* or *Breaking Bad*, but that actually plays right into the discourse surrounding USA Network as a place for “enjoyable” and “unapologetic” television (again using the words of *Burn Notice*’s Matt Nix). I do not think USA Network executives would complain if *The A.V. Club* gave all their series A grades, but their desire to be an inclusive place for escapism and fun allows them to embrace the above-average view that critics have of their series.

And although critics might not be fawning over the quality of USA Network’s programs, they do seem fully aware of how the brand image works and how the network is generally interpreted. In Noel Murray’s aforementioned review of *Burn Notice*’s second season premiere, he called the series “light-toned,” “fun,” “neat” and noted that it “made for fine summer escapism: gripping but ultimately undemanding.” Later in the second season, Murray wrote about obvious “signifiers” like “a montage of glistening ladies in swimsuits” and argued that “The formula might be familiar, but it’s the way that *Burn Notice* mixes it up that makes it such a fun show.” Todd VanDerWerff wrote that that USA Network was one of the best networks at filling its series with the “warm and welcoming cast [that] will keep viewers coming back” when
discussing the *Fairly Legal* pilot in January 2011. In his review of the same *Fairly Legal* episode, Sepinwall acknowledged USA Network’s desire to have its Characters stand out, noting that the series’ leading lady Sarah Shahi “is, in other words, a capital-C Character of the type USA likes to build shows around.” He later mentioned that the network likes to build its series around Characters with “jack-of-all-trades” skill sets. When *Covert Affairs* debuted in the summer of 2010, Sepinwall and his podcasting partner Daniel Fienberg discussed the spy series’ place among the USA Network brand and programming formula. Finally, while reviewing USA Network’s newest series *Suits* in June 2011, Sepinwall commented on the network’s “factory approach” and “baseline competency,” and acknowledged that “USA shows are designed to be light, easy-to-digest fare - even when they're not airing in the summer, they feel like they should be.”

With these comments in a number of different reviews, critics are acknowledging the USA Network programming formula, brand image and ultimately, interpreting the meaning of the USA Network generic category. Television critics have been able to point out some of the big thematic and aesthetic points of the USA Network brand/genre, from Murray’s mentioning of the ladies on the beach in *Burn Notice* to Sepinwall’s comment about the network’s emphasis on its Characters. At this point in USA Network’s brand development, these critics are fully aware of what USA Network wants to embody and they have no problem discussing that in their reviews of specific series. As he does in the *Covert Affairs, Fairly Legal* and *Suits* reviews mentioned above, Sepinwall generally likes to place each new USA Network series in the context of the brand and what it means for the network as a whole. Sepinwall and the TV Club’s open discussion about the markers and meanings of USA Network’s brand image and programming formula only work to remind/inform the readers about those things. Though it
surely is not the intent of the critics, their conversations about the formula or type of Character basically serve as free advertising for the USA Network brand. These reviews start the dialogue about the network’s various series, the programming formula and the brand image, further integrating the ideas about USA Network as a separate generic entity into the discourse more. As arguably the two most popular and most respected destinations for online television criticism, Sepinwall and The A.V. Club writers play a substantial role in the dissemination of USA Network’s formula, brand and genre through the discourse. If some of the most-read critics are talking about this topic on a consistent basis, it is most likely going to be propagated to many readers and generally thought of as true. Furthermore, I would argue that the choice of words in many of these reviews only underscores important elements of the USA Network brand image and generic category. The prevalent use of descriptors like “light-toned,” “fun,” “neat,” “gripping,” “undemanding,” “warm,” “welcoming,” “glistening,” “escapism” and “easy-to-digest” in reference to USA Network and its series aligns the reviews with some of the major markers of the brand identity and continues to remind readers and viewers of what USA Network represents. When both executives and critics continually reference these kinds of sunny descriptors, they come closer to being true, or at least appear to be so. Intentionally or not, critics’ mostly-positive response to and interpretation of USA Network’s series and brand image perpetrates many of the meanings the network itself emphasizes in its branding campaigns. This ultimately fuels the discourse surrounding USA Network more and allows the network’s content to exist as a separate generic category.

Media writers similarly circulate the discursive meanings swirling around USA Network through stories and interviews. Though these traditional journalists are not required to review and interpret the network and its programming in the same ways that television critics do, the
discussions often cover the same topics and therefore assist in furthering the USA Network generic category to more people. Because of USA Network’s substantial success, a number of stories lauding said successes have appeared in some of the most recognizable newspapers, magazines and online publications over the last few years. Each of these stories features a very positive, praising tone in regards to how USA Network has grown into a television powerhouse. Since 2007, admiring pieces on USA Network have appeared in *Slate*\(^{26}\), *Entertainment Weekly*\(^{27}\), *The Los Angeles Times*\(^{28}\), *Forbes*\(^{29}\), *Ad Age*\(^{30}\), *Newsweek*\(^{31}\), *The Atlantic*\(^{32}\) and the *Wall Street Journal* (twice)\(^{33}\). Most of these stories paint the picture of USA Network’s development in the “Characters Welcome” era, discuss the brand image and the network’s summertime successes. I will not belabor the point with excerpts from each story, but here a few choice, representative selections:

“But as much as USA's summer shows are light and look good, they're not dumb. … The network hasn't set the bar that high. It's got no aspirations to be HBO or Showtime, but that's not the point. All USA's programming proves is that you don't have to be stupid during the summer to be entertaining, and it's reaping rewards for it.” – Alyssa Rosenberg, *The Atlantic*\(^{35}\)

“A wilderness of repeats and wrestling less than a decade ago, the network has used its lighthearted model to conquer the cable world. …USA's characters innovate and improvise, outlast their enemies and survive adversity—all the while determined to continue enjoying life, even in these darker times. The network, then, may be providing us a glimpse into a new kind of American dream. If USA’s stellar ratings are any indication, we are paying attention.” – Jordan C. Hirsch, *Wall Street Journal*\(^{36}\)
“Careful not to be too dark, USA is still a high-Freudian fiesta with a thing for crime.” – Troy Patterson, *Slate* 37

Similarly, a number of these articles on USA Network emphasize the formula. The *Entertainment Weekly, Wall Street Journal* and *Ad Age* pieces specifically include numbered or bullet-pointed lists that explain how the network has become a television power. Amy Chozick’s 2011 *Wall Street Journal* piece introduces a three-step process called “The Happy Formula”: “Not too dark,” “Blue sky” and “Clean and uptown.” 38 Dan Snierson’s 2009 *Entertainment Weekly* article calls his five-pronged approach “USA Network’s secrets for success” and they include “Quirk it up,” “Go blue” and “Keep it light.” 39 Moreover, many of the articles reference USA Network buzzwords in their headlines (generally, the most-read part of a story):

“The Happy-Time Network.”

“USA Network’s Blue Skies.”

“How USA Network Built ‘Character,’ Ratings.”

“USA Network: An Oasis in Television’s Summer Desert.”

“USA’s Magic Formula for Making Hits.”

When combining the tone, the content emphasis and choice of headline these numerous articles in popular publications, it is clear that the discourse around USA Network is regularly reaffirmed by media journalists. Just like the critics’ reviews of USA Network series, these articles and interviews cover all the big points of the network’s formula, brand and genre. Apart from the obvious discussion about USA Network’s successes, these pieces touch on the network’s aesthetic and thematic benchmarks (blue skies, escapism, summer, Character), regularly (and positively) reference the programming formula and use words that closely connect to the terminology USA Network wants to be known by. Throw in glowing quotes from USA
Network executives like Bonnie Hammer and Jeff Wachtel or employees like *Burn Notice* showrunner Matt Nix, and we could say that USA Network’s brand image is easily reinforced by the media. Most of these pieces are written by journalists simply reporting on USA Network’s successes, yet there is very little interrogation of what the network does, and therefore every article comes off as fairly celebratory (especially when compared to some of the more lukewarm critic reviews referenced earlier). Tonal matters aside, this batch of articles further places the main talking points of the USA Network brand into the cultural discussion. One or two articles on the subject could create a small blip, but I have presented nine articles from just the past four years, which is tellingly excessive. Readers have been bombarded with glowing articles all discussing USA Network’s formula and branding successes, again making it seem as if the network is a very special case that deserves extra-special (and somewhat exhaustive) attention. Through these discourses, journalists reaffirm the USA Network brand identity and help it become a separate generic category that is purportedly worth discussing vigorously and consistently. These articles are arguably more influential than critic reviews because they appear in eight different publications, all of which have distinct (albeit somewhat) overlapping readerships. The people reading the *Wall Street Journal* or *Ad Age* are not necessarily the same people who are reading *Entertainment Weekly* or *Slate*. This means that there is a larger swath of people learning or being reminded about USA Network than those who just watch the network or are interested in television criticism. And presumably, the more people who are aware of USA Network, the more it is talked about. I again want to note that although none of these articles make explicit comments about the USA Network generic category, the rigor and consistency at which it is covered makes it seem as if the network is something different and worth discussing.
This focus on USA Network’s special-ness has gone on for long enough in pop culture discourse that I believe we can define USA Network as its own, separate generic category.

**Genre evaluation: Assessing audience response to USA Network programming**

While USA Network discursively works to define itself as a genre and the critical community interprets the meanings of that genre, the actual impact or popularity of a generic category is determined by one group: audiences. Without people actually watching the programming, USA Network would not be as successful, the branding campaign would not matter and there would be little reason to discuss USA Network at all. Audiences are an integral part of the discourse surrounding genres. There are a number of ways to assess the reaction of audiences to USA Network genre. In Mittell’s chapter on the audience’s role in the discourse surrounding daytime talk shows, he uses surveys to get a handle on how people responded to the programs he was writing about. For the purposes of this project, I have decided not to use surveys or interviews for several reasons. First of all, the circumstances of the USA Network case study are slightly different than how Mittell approaches the daytime talk shows. That chapter is an insular case devoted entirely to discovering the place of audiences in the discourse surrounding genres. His chapter on daytime talk shows does not fully discuss the place of the industry or critics, but instead focuses nearly all of its attention on the audience (and while the rest of his book tackles those other groups, it does so through other case studies). Again, because I am trying to paint a larger picture of how all three groups fit into the creation of the USA Network genre and I have argued that the industry is the most dominant element in that creation, the audience and critic groups are going to receive slightly less attention.

Secondly, in today’s era of internet usage and activity, there is a substantial amount of publicly provided content that can be useful in gauging audience response to USA Network, its
brand and its stable of programs. From series-specific message boards and comments sections to Twitter and Facebook, there are countless digital spaces full of audience reactions to USA Network-related content. Therefore, for audience-related evidence, I will be using statements and posts free and open to the public online. Taken at face value, we can assume that the audience responses found online serve as a realistic representation of how people feel about USA Network and its programming. Of course, not all viewers who watch Covert Affairs or White Collar take to the comments sections or Twitter right after an episode airs; in fact, we can assume that most of them do not. Fans voicing their opinions online represent a more active sector of a series’ viewership and do not necessarily reflect the majority viewpoint. However, the exact same could be true of audience members surveyed or interviewed through traditional ethnographic means.

An important question to raise here is what do we really mean by evaluate? The basic definition of evaluate suggests that it means “to set or determine the value of.” However, it is crucial to remember the context of this value. If we are discussing the evaluation done by audiences, we mean the value of a genre and its representative texts as determined by those audiences. And audiences are presumably evaluating a genre and its representatives based on one major principle: “Do I like this?” (with any number of variations such as “Do I want to watch this?” or “Would I recommend this to a friend?” flowing from the same principle). Time is the audience members’ biggest asset and they do not want to waste it on genres or programs they do not like.

Accordingly, one of the most obvious ways to survey the audience’s response to USA Network and its programming is to look at the Nielsen television ratings. Although the Nielsen ratings are severely flawed in their scope and methodology, the fact that the television industry still uses them as the primary data point for a series’ success or failure means that all networks
are on a (terribly problematic) level playing field.\textsuperscript{41} Even a quick look at the relatively recent Nielsen ratings tells us that audiences have positively evaluated USA Network and its programming. At the end of 2010, USA Network was named the most-watched channel on cable for the fifth year in a row.\textsuperscript{42} In March 2011, the network posted a victory in the quarterly cable ratings for the 19\textsuperscript{th} straight time, dating back to 2006.\textsuperscript{43} USA Network has often topped its NBC Universal cousin NBC in the ratings, both in the summer and during the traditional television season.\textsuperscript{44} Of the top 12 highest-rated ad-supported cable series of summer 2010 (late May to late August), USA Network had half of them, including three in the top five (\textit{Royal Pains, Burn Notice} and \textit{Covert Affairs}) that beat the likes of the buzzworthy \textit{The Jersey Shore, Deadliest Catch} and \textit{American Pickers}.\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Psych} is likely the lowest-rated of USA Network’s current offerings and it still averages around 3.5 million viewers an episode, a fine cable rating in the cluttered, attention-deficit, post-network era. And of course, these ratings do not include the viewers watching television in new, non-traditional manners (DVR usage, online streams, illegal downloads and DVD set purchases), the 95 percent\textsuperscript{46} of the 115.9 million United States television households\textsuperscript{47} that do not volunteer to have their viewing monitored by Nielsen or international viewership, suggesting that the tabulated and reported viewership for USA Network programming is much smaller than the actual, completely undeterminable totals. Moreover, we could point to the fact that no series originally developed as a series by USA Network has been cancelled in the “Characters Welcome” era as another marker of positive response.\textsuperscript{48} Although networks can keep series around for a variety of reasons, there still has to be \textit{some} audience willing to watch it. Thus, it appears fairly clear from the numerical ratings data used by the television industry that USA Network is a major success with audiences. Each of its scripted series has a solid viewership and in the “Characters Welcome” era, it has been able to develop
and cultivate new series with ease. With this information in mind, we can assume audiences have positively evaluated USA Network and its programming. As I said previously, the biggest question audiences have in the evaluation process is “Do I like this?” or “Should I watch this?” and in the case of USA Network, the answer is almost certainly “yes.” I think we can assume that no one consistently watches a network or program they do not like, so the millions of people watching USA Network on any given week or night are explicitly positively evaluating the programming. Individuals might watch a random episode and never return, but there is really no way to know that. Nevertheless, the overall viewership ratings tell us that USA Network has been warmly received by audiences over the last half-decade, which just happens to coincide with the “Characters Welcome” era.

One other slightly vague, but useful signal of the audience’s response to USA Network is the relative popularity of their social media accounts. In today’s age, social media is an important tool that television networks and series have in the battle for audience attention. As I discussed in the previous chapter, USA Network has been particularly successful with its social media initiatives and their various accounts are relatively popular based on the number of followers and fans they have. For example, with over 2.6 million “likes” on Facebook and more than 50,000 followers on the official Twitter account (as of February 6, 2012), *Burn Notice* is the most popular USA Network series, social media-wise, (based on numbers alone). *Psych* is similarly popular in these spaces, with almost 2.2 million “likes” on Facebook and more than 83,000 followers on Twitter. All of the other currently-airing USA Network series fall in line behind *Burn Notice* and *Psych*, with no series’ account garnering fewer than 118,000 likes on Facebook or 6,000 followers on Twitter. For a quick comparison, I looked at the social media accounts for a few other ad-supported cable series that obtained similar or better Nielsen ratings in the
summer of 2010\textsuperscript{54}: TNT’s \textit{Rizzoli & Isles}, \textit{The Closer} and \textit{Leverage}, along with A&E’s \textit{The Glades}. As of February 6, 2012, the social media likes/followers breakdown is as follows: \textit{Rizzoli & Isles}, 500,000 likes on Facebook\textsuperscript{55}, 18,000 followers on Twitter\textsuperscript{56}; \textit{The Closer}, 970,000 likes on Facebook\textsuperscript{57}, 15,000 followers on Twitter\textsuperscript{58}; \textit{Leverage}, 710,000 likes on Facebook\textsuperscript{59}, 12,000 followers on Twitter;\textsuperscript{60} \textit{The Glades}, 258,000 likes on Facebook\textsuperscript{61}, no official Twitter account. Most of USA Network’s series surpass or equal these other, similarly-rated series in both Facebook likes and Twitter followers. Of course, there are important caveats to mention in regards to social media accounts. There is no way to really determine if the people liking and following \textit{Burn Notice}, \textit{Psych} or any of USA Network’s series actually watch them as well. Common sense would tell us to assume that many of them do, but it is impossible to say how many do or even how regularly these fans and followers watch.\textsuperscript{62} Similarly, the possibility for spam and dummy accounts making up the millions of likers and followers on Facebook and Twitter is very real, especially on Twitter. I do not think USA Network – or any network – tries to prop up its social media figures with fake accounts, but there are countless spam bots and other issues present in these spaces that should make anyone approach this data with caution. However, we have to assume that account validation problems or actual viewing habits of USA Network’s social media likers/followers are just as present with any other series’ account. \textit{The Closer} and \textit{Leverage} could have just as many spam bot followers on Twitter. We do not know for sure, but the problems with validity are true across all of social media. No matter the issues and concerns, it is clear that the popularity of social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter is important to television networks. If they were not, they would not have them. Thus, the relative popularity of USA Network’s various accounts is an important victory and representative of audience’s positive evaluation of USA Network’s series and its overall generic category.
The ratings success of USA Network and the general audience connection to their social media accounts still only paints a portion of the audience response picture. Surveying the various reactions to the network and its programming will further crystallize the ways in which viewers evaluate the USA Network genre. I think one of the easiest ways to explore audience response to USA Network’s programming and the genre as a whole is to look at the comments on the reviews from the same critics I mentioned earlier. I have already explained how the critics (Alan Sepinwall and the TV Club group) reacted to specific episodes or series and hopefully using those reviews as reference points will contextualize the audience’s evaluation of them.

The first round of comments I want to present reflect the kind of positive evaluation that falls in line with USA Network’s ratings and social media success. Meaning, these are comments that reflect a certain positive response to individual series and the kind of programming USA Network airs. The majority of the 88 comments on Noel Murray’s first *Burn Notice* review from 2008 ask for continued coverage of the series (commenters got their wish sometime after). There are a few slightly negative comments, but the majority of them are positive. The following are a few select comments from Murray’s review:

“I f*cking love this show. It's a relief from procedural crime/medical shows. I'd be happy if CBS got rid of all those *CSI* shows and just played this. It's awesome because they don't try to be real. …Please keep reviewing this.” – *Wildethang*

“Love this show... you hit the nail on the head describing it as undemanding... and it is a lot of fun.” – *Some Fucking Idiot*
“*Burn Notice* is some of the best mindless entertainment to come around in a long time and I'm stoked that it made the cut for the AV Club. This show is like a beach-book but for your face.” – *Super Nintendo Chalmers*64

Similarly positive responses are found on Kenny Herzog’s June 2011 review of the *White Collar* season three premiere. The TV Club allows users to vote on the letter grade of the episode and in the case of this specific case, the users gave the *White Collar* episode a B-plus. And again, here are a few select user comments on the review:

“*White Collar* is currently the best of the USA shows.” – *A Blaffair to Rememblack*

“It's [*White Collar*] not exactly aiming for greatness, but I feel like it has been getting tighter as it goes on, and this first episode is a nice hint that maybe White Collar will avoid the S3-slump.” – *La Pipe*

“Good writing. Definitely an A episode of *White Collar*. Like Kenny said this was as good as an episode of *White Collar* ever gets. If you didn't like this there's no reason to keep watching the show.” -- *A Blaffair to Rememblack*65

And even in instances where the critics are not as friendly to the USA Network series they are reviewing, there are commenters speaking up in support. Simon Abrams’ 2010 negative review of an episode of *Psych* on the TV Club is full of commenters voicing their contradictory opinions and taking down Abrams. However, most interesting is that even the most supportive comments for *Psych* come with a justification and acknowledgement from users who admit that it is not the best program on the air. The “reader rating” on the episode was still only a B and many of the comments reflect that kind of “good, but not great” embracing of *Psych*:
“It's dumb fluff that sometimes hits the spot just perfectly. I think it's always good to have some shows hanging around during which one can fall asleep without caring whether one missed anything. (All USA shows…fit this bill).” – ebk

“*Psych* has never and will never change the world. But for what it is, it's funny (sometimes hilarious) and just plain goddamn enjoyable. Not everything needs to be so fucking serious and thought-provoking. Sometimes you can watch TV just for, you know, fun? Without having to watch *DWTS* [*Dancing With The Stars*] or something equally soul-killing?” – A.J. Macready

“I always think of *Psych* as a great summer show. It's involving enough so that you aren't bored watching it, but it's also predictable and fluffy enough that it doesn't actually require any kind of weekly engagement or afterthought. Plus it's a great show to marathon if you're sick or have a hangover.” – doolo

“Wow, I didn't realize so many other people actually watched this show. But most people who like it seem to like it for the same reason I do. It's just sort of pleasant. Is it weird that that's a ‘virtue’? Does that say something about the show, or more about TV in general, that mindless and pleasant can be defended so passionately. But I am a fan of the show. It's not Appointment Television, but it's the perfect thing to watch while I eat breakfast on the weekend. I feel that way about all the USA shows, really. They really do make them all alike. *Psych, White Collar, Covert Affairs* – nothing groundbreaking.” – G1

These comments only reflect a very small and select portion of the television audience and the audience for USA Network’s various series, but they do provide some evidence for
audience response. The Psych review had the most comments and it only reached a respectable, but not overwhelming total of 191 as of June 30, 2011. That pales in comparison to the number of comments that appear on reviews of much more buzzworthy and respected series like Mad Men, The Office, The Walking Dead, Game of Thrones, etc. But for what it is worth, the majority of comments on all three of these A.V. Club reviews (Burn Notice, White Collar, and Psych) are positive. This tells us that even in the hyper-critical and overly sarcastic comment section of a place like The A.V. Club, there is an audience for USA Network programming – and a fairly passionate one at that. Additionally, taking a closer look at some of the selected comments suggests that while these viewers are absolutely willing to sing the praises of their favorite USA Network series, they are also aware of the network’s goals for programming, both stylistically and thematically. The different words and phrases the commenters use present this knowledge: “undemanding,” “not exactly aiming for greatness,” “dumb fluff,” “never going to change the world,” “predictable,” “doesn’t actually require any weekly engagement or afterthought” and “pleasant.” Even the most supportive White Collar comment calls the series “the best of the USA shows,” not the best series on all of television, or even basic cable. Viewers are more than willing to praise the USA Network programming and defend it when they feel like reviewers are being too harsh (like they were in the case of Abrams’ review of Psych), but their laudation only goes so far. This is certainly reflective of USA Network’s aims for its programming and how viewers respond to it. These comments can be labeled as “positive” but with slight caveats. The responses are not negative per se, but more rational and logical evaluations of what type of programming USA Network has to offer. If we return to my initial assumption about audience evaluation, I would argue that these commenters have decided that “Yes, I do want to watch
USA Network series X,” and that they are acutely aware of what watching USA Network series X means.

Moreover, one of the most curious things about some of the comments found on the various Alan Sepinwall/A.V. Club reviews is how aware the commenters are of USA Network’s rapid rise through the television ranks and their current place as a major player within the industry. A number of these comments hit on the major touchstones of the brand, furthering the discussion about what the network’s image and formula mean. On Sepinwall’s 2008 review of the In Plain Sight pilot episode, one anonymous commenter mentioned USA Network’s growing profile:

“It’s amazing to me how USA has become the network that it has. This summer, they'll be running new episodes of In Plain Sight, Monk, Psych, Burn Notice and Law and Order: Criminal Intent. Is there another network that puts up summer programming like that?”

This kind of discussion took place in the comments section of Sepinwall’s 2009 post on the White Collar pilot as well. The USA Network brand and formula developed further in the sixteen months between In Plain Sight and White Collar’s respective premieres, which is reflected in the comments:

“I am so excited by the premiere of White Collar. I am a big fan of USA's brand of show and they do know how to build characters out of standard rehash so it somehow seems fresh.” – Mary

“Unless the first episode is seriously sucky, I expect to give it a chance. I'm happy to hear that there's no anger/tension between the two leads. Even on USA, which
has done a terrific job of providing a fresh take on TV clichés, I can do without it.” – Maura

“The show's the typical USA style of fun.” – Anonymous

“Excellent pilot, perfect fit in the USA lineup. An excellent companion piece to ‘Burn Notice’.” – zodin2008

“White Collar is a perfect companion to Burn Notice which is a perfect companion to Monk which is a perfect companion to Psych which is perfect companion to In Plain Sight which is a perfect companion to the soon-to-be D'Onofrio-less/Erbe-less/Bogosian-less L&O:CI. It's become a one-note network of lighthearted law/crime shows. They are all mashing together now and I'm bored. USA used to have The Dead Zone and The 4400 which were darker dramas. D'Onofrio's CI character was always heading down a self-destructive path until USA apparently decided that it just didn't want to go here and basically just marked time this past season until Jeff Goldblum settled in.” – Linda

A similar discussion sprung up on Todd VanDerWerff’s 2011 review of the Fairly Legal pilot episode, albeit one with a much more critical eye towards USA Network’s programming formula:

“Why does USA keep making the same show? Burn Notice. Royal Pains. Fairly Legal. Main character is fired and starting over and the show goes with a client-of-the-week format. It’s fucking tiresome.” – Forward Looking, Always
“Don't forget White Collar. And that other one. About the chick and the dude and witness protection or something.” – Space Coyote

“I've wondered for a long time now if there is some suit at USA who won't greenlight shows unless they can be described as being kind of like Burn Notice. ‘It's like Burn Notice in New York!’ or ‘It's like Burn Notice, but the main spy is a woman!’ And so on. I'm not really sure why that is, but it's been going on forever. In Plain Sight, for example, is more of a regular procedural show but after seeing a few scenes with the protagonist's mom and sister and her fiancé (or whoever that guy she occasionally slept with was), it definitely seemed to have a ‘reverse gender Burn Notice’ component to it. The screw-up brother is now a screw-up sister. And so on. …And what does any of that stuff add to a show about people going into witness protection? Other than being able to make commercials that made it seem more like Burn Notice? I don't get the slavish devotion to the formula (although the protagonist doesn't always have to be fired, sometimes they change careers because they want to). It's one thing for Royal Pains to be the medical version of Burn Notice, since they're both produced by the same people. But every original show on your network except Psych? That's overkill. I read an article that made it seem like the people who run the network think they have to do that to get ratings. But why? They occasionally get good results with other types of shows such as Psych or Monk. Why not branch out more and try new things? Take White Collar, for example. Does Neal really need to be under house arrest? All that does is take the ‘Michael can't leave Miami’ thing to ridiculous extremes in order to make the show a little more like Burn Notice. It doesn't need
to be *Burn Notice: New York*. It can be its own ‘It Takes a Thief’ type of deal instead of awkwardly shoehorning in stuff to keep the suits happy.” – Tek Jensen of *Alpha Squad Seven*

These responses certainly differ from those on Sepinwall’s review. Unlike the celebratory comments discussed above, many of these reactions are negative and critical. Using the basic definition of evaluation, we could say that the negative comments reflect a rejection (however slight) of the USA Network programming formula and brand image. If the primary evaluative question is “Do I want to watch this?” we might say that the negative responses answer with a moderately disgruntled “No.” However, the fact that the negative reactions seem relatively detailed in their criticisms tells us that these commenters probably still watch – or at least have watched – multiple episodes of the series they are complaining about. Maybe they are less enchanted by the USA Network formula and brand in 2011 than they were in 2008, but the comments suggest that these individuals are still somewhat interested, thus the anger.

Furthermore, these comments suggest that whether or not certain audience members like a specific USA Network series or the programming formula as a whole, they know what to expect from the network. The positive-leaning comments embrace the formula while the more negative ones decry it, but I would argue that the most important element of the comments is the acknowledgement and discussion of USA Network’s programming formula and brand image. The network’s formula and brand are so well-known to these commenters that they can repeat the important features of it with little difficulty. Of course, we cannot assume that the statements of a few people on the internet stand in for all the viewers who watch *Burn Notice* or *In Plain Sight* on a weekly basis. Perhaps many of the viewers do not care or even think about the similarities in formula seen in all of USA Network’s series because they are too busy relaxing
while watching the series or more likely, worried about dozens of other things not related to the internal structure of television programs (in fact, this is probably exactly what USA Network hopes the audience is doing). Nevertheless, when we combine the across-the-board ratings success of USA Network’s series with the more specific reception feedback found in the comments sections of these television criticism web sites, it paints a clearer (but not complete) picture of the audience response to USA Network overall. The ratings successes and longevity of nearly all the network’s series in the “Characters Welcome” era presents fairly concrete evidence that audiences have positively evaluated the programming. Enough of the audience has decided that they do in fact want to watch USA Network programming. Moreover, many of the online comments indicate that audiences (or at least a portion of them) have acknowledged the touchstones of USA Network’s programming formula and brand image. Some members of the audience might be frustrated with the stagnant similarities found within all of USA Network’s scripted offerings, but they can certainly point out those similarities with ease. Again, this dual evaluation and acknowledgement of USA Network’s formula and brand image is discussed by certain members of the audience in the comment sections of reviews (and likely on message boards and on social media spaces as well), typifying the kind of discourse needed to identify all of USA Network’s programming as generally connected together, but also different from most everything else on television. These responses insinuate that USA Network content is “fun,” “dumb” and “predictable,” but still USA Network-y in its fun-ness, dumb-ness and predictable-ness. With that said, the audience’s awareness of what a USA Network series brings to the table only furthers the talking points of the programming formula and brand image in the discourse. Just like the critical community and the various media publications, the audience – at least the audience members who are willing to voice their opinions online – has embraced the touchstones
of the USA Network formula and brand, and their discussion of those things in comments sections keeps those meanings in circulation. This acknowledgement of and discussion about all things USA Network only crystallizes the possibility of USA Network existing as its own generic category more.

**Brand promises, critical interpretations, audience evaluations and the middlebrow**

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that USA Network strives to offer fun, enjoyable middlebrow entertainment that does not ask much of its audience. I think USA Network wants its content to be easily consumable, but not entirely forgettable. Today’s televisual landscape necessitates that a cable network position itself in some way beyond the typical branding measures (name, logo, content). Returning to some of the branding terminology from chapter two, a brand image has to have a specific meaning or promise behind it to be truly successful. Without any larger meaning or promise attached to the brand, consumers (in this case, viewers) will not care and there will be very little brand equity. Therefore, the brand image has to extend past the content and promotion to impact the audience emotionally. Anyone watching your network has to feel embraced by whatever ideology or value you are promising. And the relative success of your channel or network is echoed in the acceptance of the brand image and ideology.

As I mentioned earlier, various scholars have argued that HBO positions itself and its audience on ideas of quality and exclusivity and I think very few people would argue that HBO has been a failure since the “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO.” era began. Scholars have presented other recent examples that similarly connect brand image successes to overall successes. In his work on Nickelodeon, Kevin S. Sadler argues that the cable network’s brand image is based on being “prosocial,” which centers “elements such as diversity, nonviolent action, appropriate levels of humor, and guidelines for success – all without ever talking down to kids.” Sadler further
argues that Nickelodeon triumphed with the prosocial brand image because it evoked the same sensibilities at all times of the day and in all programming, with a “mature handling of teenage issues” that appealed to a target audience that did not want to be lectured to.71 Mittell analyzes Cartoon Network’s branding victories in a similar fashion, arguing that the network tapped into a certain sense of nostalgia for the cartoons of old, which in turn created a very specific taste culture around the programming. Just as Nickelodeon appealed to the young adult, Cartoon Network hooked in the older viewer who wanted to relive the cartoons of old without necessarily feeling like a quote-unquote kid.72

The point is that HBO, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network all promised very specific meanings to a very specific audience and all three were ultimately successful in pairing the right kind of brand image with the right kind of audience. Once critics, journalists and audiences started to recognize the kind of programming and brand image these three cable channels provided, the discourse was fueling the fire of the promises HBO, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network were offering to begin with. In that sense, these exceptional branding campaigns are a product of a number of groups and factors working together to create the kinds of achievements HBO, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network reached over the last two decades. Industrial forces can only take a brand image or programming formula so far. The response of critics and audiences is essential to the overall accomplishments of a network. People not only have to like the programming, they have to be able to easily identify and interpret it. And like HBO, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, I think USA Network has found the perfect audience for its brand image and programming formula. The network promises fun, escapism, inclusiveness and easily-consumable content, and both critics and audiences are relatively responsive to and aware of those promises within individual series. Critics like, but do not love most of USA Network’s
offerings, but they have certainly interpreted the series in the same way that the network positions them. The modest critical reaction to USA Network’s series actually plays right into the overall middlebrow charm of the network’s content. USA Network does not want to be HBO; it does not want to promise prestigious quality and exclusivity. So when critics prefer most HBO series over USA Network series while still acknowledging that USA Network content has something to offer, it only helps USA Network’s overall positioning. The audience’s slightly more positive response accomplishes the same goals. Viewers have clearly proven that they enjoy what the network has to offer and based on the comment sections of various reviews, viewers have also proven that they understand USA Network’s programming formula and brand image. USA Network has garnered acceptance, but more importantly, awareness, from both the critical and audience communities. It promises sunshine, escapism, inclusivity and middlebrow entertainment, and judging by the responses I have presented here, critics and audiences perceive the network’s content just like that. In the case of USA Network, all three groups (industry, critics, and audiences) have come to a consensus on what the meanings of USA Network’s programming formula and brand image are. This is how successes can develop in the current landscape of the television industry.

Finally, there are two things that separate USA Network from similar branding successes like HBO, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. First is the aesthetic and thematic connection between the programming formula and brand image. Everything that USA Network produces in relation to its original programming is linked in some way. The dominant elements of the programming formula are similarly dominant in the brand image and vice versa. The programs and the brand image look and feel the same, just as the overall atmosphere and ideology expressed by all USA Network-related content to the audience is the same. The USA Network
experience is, with little exception, identical, across program, promotional product or media platform. Although other networks like HBO, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network have cunningly fashioned branding campaigns that have appealed to audiences and somewhat connected their respective programming stables together, it is hard to say that those connections reached the same level as USA Network’s. There is no question that critics and audiences are aware of the inherent HBO-ness that defines programs such as *The Sopranos, Deadwood, The Wire, Game of Thrones, Entourage, Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *True Blood*. However, it is more difficult to argue that the similarities in structure and theme that define every single one of USA Network’s programs are also present in all, or even most, of HBO’s offerings. The same can be said for Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. USA Network’s ability to join its programming formula to its brand image is second to none in the television industry. Secondly, the response to that formula/brand hybrid is just as integral as the hybrid itself. Both critics and audiences seem responsive to and highly cognizant of the things that USA Network is doing with its programming formula and branding campaign. The network’s brand image is regularly discussed in critic reviews of new USA Network series and spurs on conversation in the comment sections of those reviews. Even the lukewarm reviews and negative comments follow the same kind of pattern, with regular nods to the kind of adjectives and descriptors that USA Network executives also use to describe their programming and brand. Explicitly or not, critics and viewers have bought into the themes and meanings USA Network promises with its programming and brand image. As reflected in the reviews and the comments described above, some of them might not actually like those promises or enjoy the development of the programming formula, but they are still mindful of what those promises and formulas are. Therefore, the regular critic and commenter discussion about the USA Network formula, the brand image and how the two are
connected circulates those ideas and meanings more. Seven years into the “Characters Welcome” era, the discourse surrounding USA Network is well-established and every time a new series debuts or another review is written, the same kind of conversations persist, which only increasingly cements the overall discourse about USA Network. The discourse might not all be positive, but it constantly references the same kind of things and positions USA Network programming and brand imagery as inherently USA Network-like. The network blurs the line between programing formula and brand image. Consequently, the industry, critic and audience discourse surrounding those maneuvers activates USA Network into its own generic category.

The successful activation of the USA Network generic category creates built-in awareness of the network’s products, but also further promotes escapism, inclusiveness, Character and sunshine. The closing chapters will now transition into focusing on some of the textual elements of the USA Network generic category and how these elements only further illustrate the overall meanings and ideologies promised by the generic category.

NOTES


22 VanDerWerff, “Fairly Legal – Pilot.”


33 Hirsch, “USA’s Magic Formula For Making Hits.”
on Facebook. See: http://www.getglue.com for more details.


A new social media service called Get Glue is trying to do just that, wherein people “check in” when they are watching television episodes, movies or listening to music. USA Network is relatively popular on this site as well, and this has contributed to its success. It is unique among cable networks in that it can boast of having a more engaged audience than broadcast networks. USA Network is also popular on Facebook, which is probably why it continues to attract viewers. See: http://www.facebook.com/usa (accessed 6 February 2012).


Again, things like The 4400 and The Starter Wife are unique exceptions to USA Network’s mostly blemish-free record. The former was developed pre-’Characters Welcome’ and the latter was originally planned to be a miniseries before becoming an ongoing series due to awards buzz and moderate audience response.


This excludes the accounts for Suits and Necessary Roughness, the two series that debuted in late June 2011.


My use and analysis of audience response in this chapter is indebted to Ien Ang’s Watching Dallas. Ang and I both present a similar analysis of individual audience responses (from willing members who responded to her want
ad in a Dutch newspaper), their word choices and general feelings about a text (in this case the long-running primetime soap *Dallas*). Moreover, Ang also argues that the varying responses to *Dallas* in the discourse are related to the series’ connection to “mass culture” (and especially American television as a whole); wherein those who claim to despise the series do so because of its “simple”-ness and those who claim to enjoy it do so for very similar reasons (the term “guilty pleasure” is referenced more than once by respondents). Ang goes into more detail about viewer hate, ironic viewing and outright love, but her discussion of how those different viewing positions/evaluations is tied to taste, distinction and ideology – much like my discussion of USA Network viewers. For more see: Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985).

73 “Middlebrow” is one of those terms with varying definitions. In his work, “Masscult & Midcult,” Dwight Macdonald relates middlebrow to his conception of the “Midcult.” He argues that products within the middlebrow/Midcult schema have “the essential qualities” of mass-produced (and evil) Masscult products – formula, most notably – but try to have it both ways, as it “pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them.” This is a very negative viewpoint of middlebrow culture. Years later, Janice Radway’s exploration of the Book-of-The-Month Club provides a counter perspective on the issue. Radway suggests that middlebrow products, like the Book-of-The-Month books, do more than simply dilute or impersonate the highbrow that someone like Macdonald adores. While Macdonald argues that middlebrow culture cunningly appropriates avant garde styles and sensibilities, Radway notes that the middlebrow exists in direct defiance of those styles and sensibilities (as well as academia, in a way). Through her examination of middlebrow culture, Radway suggests that things like the Book-of-The-Month Club promote the importance of the individual’s emotional experience, but also support a certain sense of intellectual challenge. Ultimately, Radway posits that middlebrow culture is not simply the highbrow being smartly shaped and marketed for middle class audiences. Clearly, my use of middlebrow is more in-line with Radway’s assertions. USA Network welcomes its audience into a world of fun and sun, and that world is directly positioned against a network like HBO and its elite aura. However, USA Network’s content is not completely watered down or poorly-constructed, as I think the survey of critic reviews I have provided proves. For more on middlebrow, see Dwight Macdonald, “Masscult & Midcult,” in *Popular Culture Theory and Methodology: A Basic Introduction*, ed. Harold E. Hinds, Jr., Marilyn F. Moir and Angela M.S. Nelson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 9-15 and Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-The-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
CHAPTER V. OFFICIAL OUTLAWS: CONSTRUCTING THE USA NETWORK CHARACTER

It is my hope that the first four chapters have sufficiently explained and described how the USA Network generic category is activated, defined, interpreted and evaluated by various industrial, critical and audience forces. The focus of those chapters was to explore how the USA Network generic category reached recognition in the discourse, which meant avoiding much textual analysis of USA Network series and highlighting important areas outside the texts themselves. However, though Jason Mittell’s approach to genre study advocates for concentration on the paratext and intertext as to emphasize full generic categories instead of individual texts within that category, there is still value in examining parts of those individual texts. Focusing entirely on textual elements might is not most useful way to evaluate genres as a whole, but this kind of approach is still useful (and has been consistently implemented by critics over the years). Thomas Schatz argues that genres exist as a “narrative system” whose structural frameworks (in character, setting, plot, etc.) can be easily identified and examined.¹ Numerous scholars, including John G. Cawelti, have taken to calling these structural frameworks “conventions” and “inventions.” The analysis of textual conventions, formal characteristics and patterns of meaning that are endemic to a genre, and inventions, additions to the typical characters and patterns, can further assist in the exploration of a genre’s meaning, value and cultural position.² Schatz nicely sums up the importance of a genre’s overall “meaning” or “value”:

“Each genre’s implicit system of values and beliefs – its ideology or world view – determines its cast of characters, its problems (dramatic conflicts), and the solutions to those problems. In fact, we might define film genres, particularly at the earlier stages of their development, as social problem-solving operations:
They repeatedly confront the ideological conflicts (opposing value systems) within a certain cultural community, suggesting various solutions through the actions of the main characters. Thus, each genre’s problem-solving function affects its distinct formal and conceptual identity.”

Put simply, we could say that basic textual analysis of a generic category and its individual representatives concentrates on conventions, inventions and this overall meaning or value. The focus on conventions and inventions can be of the aesthetic, thematic or narrative type, but all those various textual elements can fall under the convention/invention umbrella.

And even though he supports a much wider range of genre study, Mittell is aware of the importance of textual analysis to genre study. He argues that textual analysis “can and should” be one of the most important approaches used when examining any media product, including genres. Mittell smartly combines the typical formal analysis-centric genre studies with his focus on context and discourse, creating a slightly altered brand of textual inquiry that still celebrates the role of cultural discussion:

“But a genre is not simply the collection of these conventions. Genres are formed through the cultural activation of textual conventions, linking them to various assumptions of definition, interpretation, and evaluation, all under the categorical rubric of the given genre. …All textual conventions are only contingently linked to a generic cluster, as changing contexts can alter the textual elements that are culturally assumed to be a component of the genre.”

Mittell’s modified view of textual analysis is applicable to the case of the USA Network generic category. The dominant textual elements that I will be discussing in the next two chapters are found within individual USA Network programs, but the way those elements have been
emphasized by the cable network’s branding campaigns and discussed heavily by critics and audiences has directly tied those elements to the overall generic category. USA Network is a relatively unique case where the “culturally assumed” textual components of the genre are actually present in all iterations within the larger generic category, but Mittell’s point is noteworthy just the same.

USA Network’s programs have a number of formal similarities (as I covered in my discussion of the formula in chapter one), but I have decided to focus on two major textual elements: the construction of the lead Character and the series’ episodic, season- and series-long narrative development. Although a survey of the location likenesses or visual similarities could be useful, examinations of the different, but ultimately like representations of the Character and the narrative choices of USA Network’s programs should provide a more compelling reflection of how the USA Network generic category accentuates welcoming, fun, but not mindless, escapist entertainment. Additionally, both of these textual trends within USA Network programs serve as solid examples of the balance between convention and invention that defines the creation and sustaining of a generic category. In both the representation of the lead Character and the programs’ narrative development, there are conventional consistencies across all of USA Network’s offerings. But there are minor alterations – or inventions – that are also important to discuss. The lead Character and the narrative progression have marginally different roles within each of USA Network’s individual series and the generic category as a whole, but both are foundational elements of the genre. This chapter will focus entirely on the representation of the lead Character and the following chapter will tackle the narrative development across multiple USA Network series.

USA Network’s lead Characters: Who are they?
As I have discussed throughout this project, the Character is the most important element of the USA Network branding campaign, the programming formula and ultimately, the generic category. Every single one of USA Network’s successful scripted series is built around at least one Character and the network does an impressive job of structuring their branding campaigns around the Characters in a similar fashion. It is relatively clear who USA Network Characters are: They are quirky, offbeat and moderately exceptional; they have “issues,” but all are manageable, not depressing, but manageable; they are complicated without being too complex; they are highly skilled in one specific area; they often play by their own rules, slightly outside of the law, but ultimately want to do the right thing by the citizens who need help; above all else, they are good people trying to do the best they can in the circumstances they currently find themselves in. Throw in slightly different ages and levels of physical attractiveness and you have the general template for the USA Network Character template that began with Monk and The Dead Zone and has only further solidified during the “Characters Welcome” era. This simple, but obviously appealing (based on USA Network’s successes) model is most importantly easily relatable. The network’s branding initiatives have allowed USA Network to position itself as a place where quirky and offbeat is the norm. And because these Characters are so relatable and understandable, the audience can feel connected to them and the overall “Characters Welcome” aura. With the Characters, USA Network tells its audience that there is absolutely nothing wrong with being eccentric and maybe a little unusual. On a basic level, the Character is something of a blank slate. “Offbeat” and “quirky” are not the most specific adjectives, and if someone only somewhat familiar with USA Network’s programming was given a list of Characters and their traits, minus their occupations or genders, I am not entirely convinced that individual could correctly identify who was who. This, of course, is the beauty of USA Network’s strategy. In the
most general sense, the Characters are all the same, but their similarities are easily consumable and understandable.

However, even though I find the similarities between all these Characters interesting, I think exploring what those similarities reflect and mean will create even more compelling discussion. There are certainly some major questions that exist when considering the minor peculiarities between these various lead Characters. I think it is safe to say that the USA Network Character exists as a certain character “type,” but it is somewhat unclear what that type is. Are these Characters traditional heroes that always do the right thing? Are they antiheroes or outlaws that are often more interested in a certain brand of personal justice and law that spurs them to step widely outside the bounds of traditional legalities? Perhaps they lean towards the superhero archetype? The distinctions between all these kinds of characters are blurred and messy and I would argue that the USA Network Characters blur and mess them up even further. Moreover, what, if anything, are we to make of the differences in gender? Are the leading female Characters of In Plain Sight, Covert Affairs and Fairly Legal substantially different than the leading male Characters of Monk, The Dead Zone, Psych, Burn Notice, Royal Pains and White Collar? Are there complex distinctions between masculinity and femininity driving the differences between male and female lead Characters? And finally, how does this play into the overall meaning of the USA Network generic category that underscores fun, escapism and inclusiveness? These questions and concerns will be the driving force of the following pages as I explore the conventional and novel aspects of the USA Network lead Character.

Television’s antihero era

USA Network’s Characters represent different parts of a few distinct hero archetypes. Like so many other concepts and terminology, the distinctions between official hero, outlaw hero
and antihero are very murky. However, I believe that each term does have its own specific definition and each is worth discussing in regard to the representation of the USA Network Character.

Since its inception, television has been full of heroic figures doing the right thing. From police officers keeping the streets safe to lawyers upholding the pillars of the judicial system to doctors saving those in dire heath circumstances, the medium’s most prevalent character professions reflect this ideology. More complex representations of the heroic character types started to trickle into the medium through 1980s dramas like Hill Street Blues and St. Elsewhere and really kick-started with the explosion of cable series like The Sopranos, The Shield, The Wire, and Deadwood in the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2000s. Over the past ten to fifteen years, a great deal of television’s most successful and critically-beloved series have been top-lined by complicated, oftentimes unlikable “antiheroes” that challenge the typical assumptions about the psychological makeup of television’s lead characters. Generally speaking, antiheroes lack traditionally “heroic” attributes and are instead amoral, cynical and self-interested, but their place at the center of a narrative implicitly makes them the protagonist. In their exploration of masculinity in 20th century film, Ashton D. Trice and Samuel A. Holland argue that antiheroes are less larger-than-life characters and more “life-sized” individuals that can be “overwhelmed” by life’s modern challenges. Throughout The Sopranos, Tony Soprano is willing to do just about anything to keep the money (and power) flowing, including murder, but he still serves as the main protagonist of the series. The same could be said for countless other lead characters, from The Shield’s Vic Mackey to Mad Men’s Don Draper. These individuals do fairly terrible things on a consistent basis, yet often do just enough to appear moderately sympathetic (or at least not utterly deplorable). Some are overly violent, while others are unfaithful to their
significant others. The antihero character type has been so prevalent on television in recent years that the popular web site TV Tropes now features a “Sliding Scale of Anti-Heroes” with five different “sub-versions” of the antihero type – based on varying degrees of violent tendencies and more – that includes multiple examples to crystallize the point. Furthermore, television critics and journalists are well-aware of the medium’s recent reliance on the antihero. In a 2009 column titled “TV’s Antihero Era Enters Its Second Decade,” The A.V. Club’s Noel Murray bemoaned television’s insistence on using this character type, noting that “‘damaged hero’ beats have become so old hat” and “have been done to death.”

I bring up the antihero revolution as to provide a backdrop for my discussion about the development and place of USA Network’s lead Character. USA Network’s success came right in the middle of the television antihero revolution and its lead Characters serve as a compelling outlier in said revolution. While many cable networks piggybacked off the generally dark antihero triumphs of HBO and *The Sopranos* and broadcast networks highlighted the work of larger ensemble units such as those on the *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Lost*, *Heroes* and various *CSI*, *Law & Order* and *NCIS* franchises, USA Network carved out space somewhere in the middle. Like the offerings of the antihero era, USA Network’s series are top-lined by very complicated individuals, or as we now know them, Characters. But unlike most cable antihero-centric programs, USA Network’s Characters are not purposefully dark, cynical or unlikable in most regards. The Characters of USA Network are, in fact, inherently likable in the traditional ways that the old broadcast networks have taught us to expect them to be. None of USA Network’s Characters is as selfish, demented or outwardly evil as the likes of Tony Soprano, Vic Mackey or Dexter Morgan. Every single one of USA Network’s lead Characters is generally working for with the “right” side and trying to live the “right” way. *Burn Notice*’s Michael Westen might
have to take a hands-off approach that leads to the death of a bad person, but rarely does he explicitly pursue violent, evil ends for his own personal benefit (even in regards to the search for who “burned” him). Moreover, *Psych*’s Shawn Spencer, *Covert Affairs*’ Annie Walker and *White Collar*’s Neal Caffrey might regularly disregard the advice of their more “official” law enforcement colleagues and bosses, but they never do so with malicious intent or unless they believe it is the last hope to solve a problem. As former USA Network honcho Bonnie Hammer noted, USA’s Characters “are flawed, but not in a dark, negative way.” Murray further underscored this point in his column:

“One of the reasons why USA’s breezy spy/detective adventure *Burn Notice* is such a fun show (and TNT’s *The Closer*, to a lesser degree) is that it focuses on people who are good at their jobs and rarely treat their heroic responsibilities as anything worse than a mild inconvenience. They *love* what they do, which makes them easy to watch.”

We can disregard USA Network’s lead Character as being representative of the general antihero ideals. Although expansive and hyper-specific details like those found on the “Sliding Scale of Anti-Heroes” might place someone like Michael Westen somewhere on the continuum, the inherent lack of darkness and evil found within the archetype of the USA Network Character prevents me from believing that the antihero construction really applies. These Characters are obviously *not* like Tony Soprano or *Breaking Bad*’s Walter White. Though they have flaws and often spend their time trying to figure out larger personal mysteries, not one of USA Network’s Characters eschews helping those in need, no matter if it disrupts their day or not. I would argue that at worst, antiheroes are innately bad people and at best they are severely misguided and dysfunctional; they rarely “develop” into better people. USA Network’s Characters, on the
contrary, are intrinsically good people with only slight imperfections and blemishes that are often buffered out over a series’ run.

If USA Network’s Characters are not antiheroes in an era of massively successful antiheroes, what do USA Network’s achievements tell us, both about whom these Characters are and what they mean and reflect in the audience’s desires? Obviously, USA Network and its executives were cunningly adept in their positioning of content, Characters and the brand, but there has to be something more at play with why these Characters and their home series have been so popular with audiences. The answer to this question is best served through an exploration of the official hero and outlaw hero character types.

**Escape with offbeat friends: Official heroes and outlaw heroes**

Robert B. Ray’s work in *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* is a well-known assessment of what he calls the official and outlaw heroes. Ray identifies a concept he calls the “thematic paradigm” of Hollywood films and argues that “repeatedly, these movies raised, and then appeared to solve, problems associated with the troubling incompatibility of traditional American myths.”¹³ In the mind of Ray (and Erik H. Erikson, who Ray cites in this section¹⁴), the American identity is powered by opposing dichotomies. Erikson offers migratory versus sedentary and competitive versus co-operative as obvious examples. For Ray, the most important of these psychological dichotomies is the battle between community and the individual and he suggests that Hollywood cinema repeatedly and intentionally explores this battle through two representatives: the official hero (community) and the outlaw hero (individualism). Ray describes the distinctions between these two character categories as:

“Embodied in the adventurer, explorer, gunfighter, wanderer, and loner, the outlaw hero stood for that part of the American imagination valuing self-
determination and freedom from entanglements. By contrast, the official hero, normally portrayed as a teacher, lawyer, politician, farmer or family man, represented the American belief in collective action and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong."^{15}

Furthermore, Ray maintains that we can view the official hero as a representative of adulthood, sound reasoning and wisdom, worldliness, collectiveness, comfortability in society and advocates of the established forms of law, justice and politics. The outlaw hero, on the other hand, is a representative of whims and emotional decision-making, distrust in civilization and society and personal brands of law, justice and politics.\(^{16}\) Ray notes that most Hollywood films of the 20\(^{th}\) century explored the distinct polarities between these two ideological representatives and often films brought characters from one extreme position to somewhere in the middle and vice versa. Finally, Ray claims these oppositional ideologies were activated during very specific social and cultural circumstances, wherein the lasting impact of The Great Depression and two World Wars led to the establishment of America’s “escapist” cinema.\(^{17}\)

Though conceived 25 years ago in regard to a specific moment in Hollywood film, Ray’s concept of the thematic paradigm and the official/outlaw hero dissimilarities are very useful prisms through which to analyze USA Network’s lead Characters. The first part of Ray’s thematic paradigm I turn to his argument that the paradigm was more or less established during a time where Hollywood cinema was defined as escapist. Again, Ray points to the cultural unrest and healing occurring after major events like The Great Depression and two World Wars as the catalysts for this escapist content. I think there are some compelling parallels with Ray’s evaluation of 20\(^{th}\) century Hollywood and USA Network. The network’s initial programming formula was introduced with *Monk* in July 2002, a mere 10 months after the September 11, 2011
attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. After struggling with some slightly darker offerings in the middle of the aughts, USA Network really found its rhythm with the introduction of the “Characters Welcome” branding slogan and the premiere of *Burn Notice* in the summer of 2007 – the same time that the United States housing market began to tumble, signaling a worldwide economic crisis that continues to this day.\(^{18}\) Interestingly, both USA Network’s initial taste of success and its second and more consistent achievements corresponded with arguably the two darkest periods in the United States’ recent history in 9/11 and the financial meltdown. Therefore, following Ray’s logic, I argue that the success of escapist Hollywood cinema is not too different from the success of USA Network over the last seven-plus years.

Robert Sklar suggests that The Great Depression in particular disrupted “some of the oldest and strongest American cultural myths”\(^ {19}\) and Hollywood was cunningly adept at reflecting those disruptions in films that followed the Depression era.*\(^ {20}\) Taking Sklar’s lead, we could argue that the 9/11 attacks and the recent economic collapse have similarly destroyed some of America’s big cultural myths, allowing USA Network to fill the same role that Ray and Sklar see post-Depression/WWII cinema embodying those many years ago. Hollywood became escapist in the post-Depression/WWII era and USA Network intelligently positioned itself in a similar way in the post-9/11, recession era. Finally, if the escapist 20\(^{th}\) century cinema led to a focus on the official/outlaw hero distinctions, perhaps USA Network’s 21\(^{st}\) century successes reflect a similar accentuation of those character types and the differences between them. Although the cultural circumstances between The Great Depression/WWII and the 9/11/recession eras are certainly different, it is hard to argue against the assumption that people turn to popular culture in difficult times, no what matter the context. Nevertheless, there appears to be an obvious connection between the successes of escapist fare and those successes’
integration of the official and outlaw hero character types. And again, USA Network’s sizable
triumphs tell us that their sunshine-drenched escapist fare is clearly touching a nerve with
American audiences.

Although USA Network’s Characters do fit within the frameworks of the official and outlaw hero types, they differ from Ray’s direction for the two representations in one primary way: they constantly straddle the line between official and outlaw. Ray notes that in films, outlaw heroes often transition into official heroes or vice versa within the frameworks of one film, but the USA Network Characters do not necessarily follow that kind of transitional arc. Instead, the Characters regularly blend of the traits that Ray suggests make up the official and outlaw hero. Within individual scenes Characters might fit one role better than the other, but they generally exist within the middle area between official hero and outlaw hero. Instead of exhaustively discussing how each USA Network Character represents each ideal of the official and outlaw hero, I have created a table that hopefully succinctly exemplifies this point. I have chosen major binaries that represent the tensions between the official and outlaw hero (maturity and reason/emotion and impulses, official law/unofficial justice and community/individuality) and within the table I have, briefly, described how the Characters fit some of these identifiers and also represent inherent contradictions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Maturity/Impulses</th>
<th>Law/unofficial justice</th>
<th>Community/Individuality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monk (<em>Monk</em>)</td>
<td>Older, adept detective (maturity); Crippled by OCD and other emotional issues (emotion, impulses)</td>
<td>Works <em>with</em> the police department (law) but only as a consultant and searches for his wife’s killer on own time (unofficial justice)</td>
<td>Has some friends, is somewhat cordial with colleagues and works to keep people safe (community); Generally regarded as an offbeat loner (individuality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny Smith</td>
<td>Older, relatively stable man (maturity); Is not driven by impulses in the traditional sense, but his abilities spur him to make</td>
<td>Works <em>with</em> the police department (law) but only in a consultant role; Is willing to step outside that role to help people</td>
<td>Has some friends, works cordially with ex-wife and her new husband and tries to save people (community); Personal issues make him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Personality</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn Spencer</td>
<td>somewhat questionable decisions (impulses)</td>
<td>if deems it necessary (unofficial justice)</td>
<td>something of a loner, his abilities make him special (individuality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Psych)</td>
<td>somewhat questionable decisions (impulses); Generally knows when to get “serious” to solve the case (maturity)</td>
<td>Works with the police department (law), but only as a consultant and is often “fired”; Solves cases in odd ways; Despite being fired, never follows rules (unofficial justice)</td>
<td>Socially functional enough to have a few friends and the police consultant job, wants to help people (community); Regularly awful at working with others and is basically homeless and solipsistic – but loves being so (individuality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Westen</td>
<td>Cunning, intelligent, crafty, etc. (maturity); Sometimes gets too emotionally invested, irrational or angry, somewhat self-interested(impulses)</td>
<td>Believes in “right and wrong” and sometimes works with law enforcement (law); Accomplishes his weekly tasks by going outside of official channels and occasionally breaks conventions of right/wrong (unofficial justice)</td>
<td>Very willing to help those in need, no matter the circumstance, has tight relationship with small group of people (community); Regularly prefers to take missions/jobs on his own and may have lost his CIA gig for rubbing people the wrong way (individuality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Burn Notice)</td>
<td>Smart, very good at her job in Witness Protection (maturity); Lets her messed up personal life impact her job, regularly follows her gut (impulses)</td>
<td>Works for Witness Protection (law); Often follows a gut instinct that steps outside expected bounds (unofficial justice)</td>
<td>Works hard to keep those in Witness Protection safe (community); Accomplishes those goals by taking a sometimes rash, instinct-based approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Shannon</td>
<td>Smart, adept physician (maturity); Sometimes is too emotionally invested (impulses)</td>
<td>Weird case because he’s a doctor, but used to be a high-powered New York physician (“official medicine”); Now runs a make-shift, unofficial practice in the Hamptons that helps both the rich and the poor (“unofficial medicine”)</td>
<td>Very willing to help those need, no matter the circumstance, has tight relationship with small group of people (community); Prefers his new, unofficial life to the more prestigious one he had before (individuality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(In Plain Sight)</td>
<td>Very smart and generally reserved (maturity); Former criminal, lies, often makes decisions based on his heart, not his</td>
<td>Used to be a white collar criminal, now works with the FBI (law), regularly steps outside FBI bounds to solve</td>
<td>Socially skilled, willing to work with larger teams/groups and wants to do right by people (community); Uses those</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank Lawson</td>
<td>Smart, adept physician (maturity); Sometimes is too emotionally invested (impulses)</td>
<td>Weird case because he’s a doctor, but used to be a high-powered New York physician (“official medicine”); Now runs a make-shift, unofficial practice in the Hamptons that helps both the rich and the poor (“unofficial medicine”)</td>
<td>Very willing to help those need, no matter the circumstance, has tight relationship with small group of people (community); Prefers his new, unofficial life to the more prestigious one he had before (individuality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neal Caffrey</td>
<td>Very smart and generally reserved (maturity); Former criminal, lies, often makes decisions based on his heart, not his</td>
<td>Used to be a white collar criminal, now works with the FBI (law), regularly steps outside FBI bounds to solve</td>
<td>Socially skilled, willing to work with larger teams/groups and wants to do right by people (community); Uses those</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Background Notes</td>
<td>Professions/Skills</td>
<td>Actions/Characteristics</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie Walker (Covert Affairs)</td>
<td>Viewed as very intelligent for her experience level (maturity), but often makes questionable in-the-moment decisions (impulses)</td>
<td>Works for the CIA (official law), but sometimes given clearance to take desperate measures – or takes them on her own accord (unofficial justice)</td>
<td>Good at working within the CIA frameworks, adept at appealing to her contacts in the field, wants to help people (community); Breaks rules, takes on solo missions (individuality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Reed (Fairly Legal)</td>
<td>Has respect for ethics that some lawyers don’t follow (maturity); Dysfunctional personal life, unorganized, somewhat scatterbrained (impulses)</td>
<td>Formally worked as a lawyer (official law); Now works as a mediator to somewhat subvert official legal channels, but still has specific unofficial code (unofficial justice)</td>
<td>Works to help people come to an agreement before court, generally wants to make lives better (community); Often accomplishes these goals by taking offbeat, confrontational or humorous approaches to mediation (individuality)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As I hope is apparent from the above table, USA Network’s various lead Characters are walking contradictions of the official/outlaw hero character dichotomy. For the most part, these Characters embody traits of both the official and outlaw hero. Each one of the Characters has professions or skills that contribute to the safety, good health or improved lives of the citizens in their respective communities, but few of them use their skills in an “official” manner. The Characters assist or consult on murders, medical emergencies, legal disputes, witness protection assignments and more, and all of them, including those working in more official capacities, step outside the frameworks of their tasks. They disobey superiors, they disregard protocols, buck social niceties and sometimes lie, manipulate and subvert their way to reach a certain end result – one that is nearly always on the correct side of “morally right.” They might be able to work within the constraints of protocols and official channels, but Characters generally prefer not to do
so. These are dysfunctional individuals with heaps of personal quirks and issues that grate on those around them, but the Characters pull it together just enough to complete their task and help those in need, no matter the circumstances. Unlike Ray’s outlaw heroes, the Characters are rarely reluctant to take on tough responsibilities, in fact they typically enjoy doing so. Characters are impulsive, but most of the time those impulses get them closer to accomplishing their goals. The Characters may not embody some of the obvious – and some would say boring – traits of an official hero like Superman or the darker traits of an outlaw hero like Batman but they comfortably fit into the complicated, but not overly complex middle ground between those two poles. Interestingly, when a Character embodies more “extreme” qualities, the series supplements them with an important co-lead Character that almost voids that extreme-ness. Psych’s Shawn Spencer is little more than a slob of a man-child but his best friend Burton Guster provides stabilizing, mature perspective on most events (and as Shawn has grown up a bit in recent episodes, Gus has been having more fun). Although Royal Pains’ Hank Lawson is generally well-adjusted do-gooder, his younger brother Evan is a sly schemer that gets in enough trouble for the both of them. And while White Collar’s Neal Caffrey is the only convicted criminal among the Characters, his suave, illegal-minded charm is cancelled out by the stuffy, traditional lawman personality of FBI honcho Peter Burke.

The construction of the Character represents a number of important things. In a post-9/11 age riddled with economic unrest, this kind of character type shows the audience at home that America is still a place where anyone, down to the quirkiest and oddest of individuals, can help make a difference in the lives of others. These are not overly “special” people, which makes it easy to see them as symbols of American ingenuity who help show the audience that even in a time where our biggest institutions (politics, economics, defense, education, etc.) are failing,
there are willing individuals out there fixing some of the smaller, but still important problems. USA Network’s Characters are distinctly individualistic, but they work to accomplish goals that better the community and therefore epitomize an official/outlaw hero hybrid of sorts. Americans might not have the same exact fears about isolationism in 2011 as they did in 1947, but the tension between the community and the individual is still very real in the 21st century. I would also argue that USA Network’s Characters serve as a response to the much darker, more self-interested antihero that became so popular on television in the moments before 9/11.

The Characters of USA Network personify escapism. They might be slightly more outlaw than official, but the Characters are certainly less gritty and dysfunctional than the outlaw heroes of 20th century cinema while still embodying enough complexity to rise above possibly bland official heroes. For this reason, I would suggest that USA Network’s Characters help its series and its network become more escapist than the official and outlaw heroes of 20th century cinema. These Characters are easily understandable, likable, admirable and relatable, but not overly simple or basic. They have senses of humor and operate with a nice bit of self-awareness that only makes them appear to be more relatable and enjoyable to spend an hour a week with. The Characters’ problems are easily understood and (generally) swiftly solved. Unlike some complex or heighted representations on television, the Characters feel like real people, they feel like friends. The Characters approach life the way USA Network appears to approach television: they are idiosyncratic, but ultimately controlled; they are sarcastic and fun, but driven, reaching traditional goals by nontraditional means. All of this creates the amiable persona of the USA Network Character that the audience can latch onto with ease. Judging by the recent past of our country, that is an overwhelmingly appealing proposition. And again, the relatable, appealing nature of the Character is backed up by USA Network’s multi-faceted branding campaigns.
Masculinity and femininity: Gender’s middle ground in Character representation

One final curious thing about USA Network’s Characters is how they exude – or do not exude – masculinity and femininity. Although there are certain shades to a certain Character’s persona that reflect traditional gender stereotypes or roles, the majority of the network’s Characters exist in an odd space that de-emphasizes their gender or their sexuality. Rarely are any of the three leading female Characters’ bodies objectified by the traditional male camera gaze of the typical Hollywood production. On the flip side, although *Burn Notice*’s Michael Westen and *Royal Pains*’ Hank Lawson live in relatively warm vacation hot-spots, they are rarely seen with their shirts off and muscles highlighted, either. There are some exceptions, as *White Collar*’s Matthew Bomer is occasionally shirtless in his portrayal of conman Neal Caffrey. I think most people would say that many of USA Network’s lead Characters are physically attractive, but the series themselves do not seem particularly interested in explicitly exploiting their attractiveness in the ways audiences might be used to. The lack of objectification indirectly further positions USA Network against the supposed “quality” television of pay cable networks like HBO and Showtime which constantly take advantage of the lifted rating restrictions and include nudity – and some would say purposeless objectification – of its performers. We could also view the de-emphasis on the physical appearance of USA Network’s Characters as yet another way that the network keeps the Characters relatable and preserves the audience’s thinking that they are just as welcome in this world as the fictional Characters. Sticking the Characters in “regular” clothing and keeping that clothing on helps the Characters appear less intimidating, more normal and thus not unlike the people watching at home.

Moreover, many of USA Network’s lead Characters reflect a slight role reversal in the traditional differences between male and female characters. The three female lead Characters (In
Plain Sight’s Mary, Covert Affairs’ Annie and Fairly Legal’s Kate) all work in more “official” capacities than many of their male counterparts. Mary is a well-respected member of the Witness Protection Staff, Annie is a rising star in the CIA and Kate works for her recently-deceased father’s mediation firm. This contrasts somewhat with the more “independent consultant/contractor” professional model that Monk, Dead Zone, Burn Notice, Psych, Royal Pains and White Collar (somewhat) all follow. One could argue that the divide between how male and female Characters work reflects stereotypes that Hollywood does not succeed with outlaw-y female leads or that they need to work within a structure to be successful. However, while Mary, Annie and Kate do work in more official structures, they tend to be particularly rebellious and insubordinate, leading them to go outside of those structures to do what they believe is right. They ultimately return to the official constraints of their jobs, only to step outside them once again. All three of these women are portrayed as intelligent, quick-witted and adept in their particular fields and they strike a solid balance between their work and personal lives. These are not women entirely dedicated to the whims of their heart or domesticity; they are dedicated to their jobs and especially devoted to helping those in need. Though television has come a long way from the June Cleavers of the 1950s, it is still important to point out that Mary, Annie and Kate represent a kind of feminine persona that does not rely on either physical appearance or love life.

On the flip side, USA Network’s male Characters are similarly challenging to the characteristic portrayals of the strong, centered male. For the most part, the network’s leading men are more dysfunctional and complicated than their female counterparts. Adrian Monk struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder, outwardly admits to having a staggering 312 phobias and struggles mightily in the aftermath of his wife’s death. 22 Johnny Smith’s
supernatural abilities create a number of issues for him. Shawn Spencer is an immature, messy, screw-up who lied his way into a police consulting job by pretending to be a psychic. Neal Caffrey is a former high-profile criminal haunted by the disappearance (and then death) of his former girlfriend and is regularly tempted to turn back to the dark side despite his work with the FBI. Michael Westen and Hank Lawson are the most “normal” of USA Network’s leading men, but they have their fair share of demons and mistakes that make life difficult to manage.

Although each man is regularly successful in his attempts to help local citizens in need, he does so by overcoming or side-lining his neuroses. And sometimes, those personal issues derail episodic adventures. One could even argue that the male Characters are more outwardly influenced by their personal issues, as Monk, Shawn, Michael and Neal occasionally struggle with their various complexes. The women certainly do too, but it feels more apparent with the men. Nevertheless, these male Characters are not overly muscular or outwardly “strong” in the traditional sense. Outside of Michael Westen, USA Network’s men solve problems with their minds, not their bodies and rarely do they purposefully engage in physical fighting or masculine tests of strength.

Interestingly, two of the three lead female Characters (Mary, Annie) use guns/physicality in their work while Michael Westen is the only man to do so. This might suggest that USA Network thought it needed more overtly “tough” women to sell those respective series, but also says that in some instances, the female Characters could be read as “masculine” while the male Characters could be looked at as more “feminine” than usual. In that sense, no lead Character fits entirely into traditional gender roles and instead they all fall into a space where gender is not necessarily stressed in an important manner. The Characters are just Characters, no matter the gender. This representation obviously helps keep the overall USA Network brand, formula and
genre consistent across multiple series and Characters. However, the approach to Character also accentuates the generic category’s connection to inclusiveness. Though these Characters are all highly skilled in certain areas, their respective series go to great lengths to express how they have peculiar tics that make them less than superhuman or larger-than-life. The branding campaigns emphasize this ideology as well. Through this method of Character construction, USA Network keeps its Characters relatable and helps the audience feel like they are not too far off from being just like Michael Westen or Annie Walker. In USA Network’s world, no one is overly-feminine or overly-masculine; they are relatable every-people with skills that are just exceptional enough to carry a weekly television series. Audiences could presumably project themselves into these kinds of roles.

Without the lead Character, the USA Network formula, brand and genre would not exist. As the most important element of the USA Network formula, brand and genre, the Characters reflect all the formula/brand/genre’s biggest aesthetic and thematic pillars. They are attractive and skilled, but not unbelievably so. They fit perfectly within their beautiful locations, but are easily relatable. USA Network’s lead Characters provide weekly jolts of enjoyment to the millions of viewers at home, but they also reflect the escapist, do-good kind of hero that world tends to enjoy in times of crisis. They straddle the line between official hero and outlaw hero, but also further embody the inclusive nature that USA Network as a whole wants to promote.

NOTES

2 John Cawelti’s foundational work on formula and genre is useful in this instance. Cawelti argues that although convention and invention have different cultural values, analyzing both within a given text or series of texts can provide evidence for a text’s larger meaning. See: John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984), 54-60.
5 Mittell, “Policing Genres – Dragnet’s Texts and Generic Contexts,” 123.
6 Schatz has a similarly-context focused suggestion for genre analysis. He argues that all genres weave cultural context into their fabrics, creating circumstances where audiences recognize relationships and patterns of action more than they do stock character and narrative tropes (Hollywood Genres, 21-22).
12 Murray, “TV’s Antihero Era Enters Its Second Decade.”
20 Much scholarship has been written on the reflection of the ideological impacts of 9/11 in popular culture, perhaps most famously in Susan Faludi, The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America (Metropolitan Books, 2007).
CHAPTER VI. PURPOSEFUL POINTLESSNESS: THE PULPY, ESCAPIST NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF USA NETWORK’S SERIES

“Since the main plots of any given PTS [primetime serial] episode may be largely self-contained, many an arc is strung along episode after episode with a few lines of dialogue or a scene or two that just barely pushes it forward.” – Michael Z. Newman, “From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative” in what indirectly describes one way in which USA Network approaches narrative

USA Network’s lead Characters are a prominent textual element that can be easily promoted and consumed as part of the network’s branding processes. It is easy to express the importance of the Character in 20-second commercials or print posters, no matter how vague those platforms are in providing details. As the most integral element of the USA Network formula and brand image, it makes sense that the Character persona is clearly defined across all USA Network content (promotional or programming). In this final chapter, I want to turn my attention to a textual convention that is also important, but less visible in the branding media USA Network has produced in the “Characters Welcome” era. Apart from the focus on the Characters and obvious visual markers (blue skies, sunshine), some of the most important textual components of the USA Network generic category are the narrative conventions. The ways in which most of USA Network’s series establish an episodic, season and series narrative structure are very clear. More importantly, I believe that the development and progression of narrative within the series of the USA Network generic category accentuate the genre’s major ideological functions of escapism and inclusiveness just as much as the Characters do. Because it is more difficult to explain narrative convention in a quick television commercial or a tweet, this portion of the USA Network generic category is lacking in the branding materials. These narrative
conventions are, however, acknowledged and discussed by critics and audiences, keeping them in the discourse swirling around the USA Network generic category. This chapter will explore exactly what makes up the narrative conventions of the USA Network genre and discuss why those conventions symbolize the significant principles of the genre.

**Television narrative, past and present**

For whatever reason, scholarly analysis of television narrative is still young, but some compelling arguments have been made about the development of the subject over the last 25 years.\(^2\) The general viewpoint on television narrative splits programs into two different types: series or serials. Throughout this project I have been using the word “series” in place of the more industrial slang term of “TV show,” but in this case, “series” means something different. In regard to narrative, television series are the typical kind of programs that present a problem at outset of an episode that is interrogated, and eventually solved, by the conclusion of that single episode. Series are defined by their execution of a resolution, an episodic payoff of a question or problem that provides a sense of temporary closure. In a series, there is little concern for overall character development or much of an “arc” whatsoever, the characters exist to serve the plot more than anything else. The stereotypical thought about television series is that they have no memory, meaning characters go through similar events week in and week out without much awareness of the repetitiveness.\(^3\) This kind of narrative is embodied in police, medical and legal procedurals (think *Law & Order* or *CSI:* ) and also many traditional comedies (anything from *Leave It to Beaver* to *Two and a Half Men*). The serial, on the other hand, is defined more by the presence of ongoing storylines that do not conclude at the end of each episode. Questions are raised but not answered and characters experience substantial change in a number of ways. Unlike in a series, the characters in serials do in fact have a memory.\(^4\) Discussions of the serial
often turn to the daytime soap opera and its seemingly never-ending plots and character
developments, but primetime dramas slowly began to integrate more serialized storytelling into
their narratives in the early 1980s.5

This basic dichotomy of televisual narrative was interrogated with a more critical eye in
the wake of the debut of more complicated programming such as MTM Enterprises’ Hill Street
Blues and St. Elsewhere in 1981 and 1982 respectively. Crafted by writers who were severely
disenfranchised with working on procedural series – Co-creator Michael Kozoll once said that
working on an episodic television series was “like raising a retarded child” – Hill Street Blues
refused to provide constant resolution to its police setting’s stories and instead strived to dangle
plots and character developments across multiple episodes and seasons.6 Hill Street Blues
ushered in a new era of television that was not only grittier and more character-based, but also
blurred the lines between series and serial. In the post-Hill Street Blues era, primetime television
programs began to combine the pillars of the series and the serial into a more complex formula
of narrative. Instead of the obvious oppositions between series and serial, we have begun to place
the various narrative “types” on a continuum of sorts. Traditional series still have their place on
television (see my aforementioned examples of CSI: or Two and a Half Men) as do the
tremendously complex, highly-serialized programs such Lost, The Wire, The Sopranos and
Arrested Development.7 These two kinds of program exist on different ends of the spectrum, with
programs that integrate both episodic series and serialized elements into their narratives stuck
somewhere in the middle.

I would argue that this grey middle ground is filled with programs defined by at least two
“sub-types” of narrative. On one hand we have the serialized program that tends to ground those
narratives in plots that are somewhat resolved or discarded all together on a weekly basis. These
“mythology procedurals” have dense ongoing arcs with many big questions, but the program only addresses them every few episodes or uses easily-solvable problems to briefly address them. Though he is describing the generalized term of “serial,” Greg M. Smith does a nice job of explaining the mythology procedural:

“These protracted, cross-episode arcs are the primary organizing structures for plot occurrences over time. Individual episodes may provide cliffhangers or resolutions, but the overall weave of the serial is in juxtaposing and arranging the arcs that connect irrevocable turning points.”

The X-Files is perhaps the most famous example of this kind of storytelling, as the series weaved its overarching UFO stories with “monster of the week” cases that had little to do with aliens and the government cover-up. Current examples such as Supernatural, Nikita and Fringe exist as well. On the other hand, we have the fairly episodic program that is powered by procedural “cases” (medical emergencies, murder investigations, courtroom dramas), but also allows its characters to have a memory and develop via arcs over time. While the problems are likely solved, the character relationships change and shift. The weekly cases are often conventional and formulaic, but the characters feel like real people and certain plotlines extend across multiple episodes instead of coming to a close at the end of one hour. Sarah Kozloff describes this type of program very well:

“Often a show will use the same protagonist for separate storylines, as when detective shows involve their heroes in both a case and a romance. Other series will use different family members as the leading players in separate storylines. …Each given storyline may be formulaic, but the ways in which it combines with,
parallels, contrasts or comments upon another storyline may add interest and complexity.”

This kind of “character procedural” can be found all over television in 2012 in programs such as *The Good Wife*, *House* and many more.

Interestingly, the development and use of these four narrative types mirrors the journey of television’s antihero that I discussed in the last chapter. Before 1980, television was more or less defined by the series template (just as it was defined by reasonably traditional heroes), but *Hill Street Blues*, *St. Elsewhere* and other early 1980s programming altered that. As time passed into the 1990s, television narrative moved further down the continuum I mentioned earlier, with *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files* representing key iterations of the mythology procedural. By the early years of the 21st century, television embraced supremely complex and super-serialized programs like *The Wire* and *Lost*. After a few years in the bright spotlight (just like the antihero, though that character type seems to be more resilient than the super-serialized program), complex serials have dimmed in popularity a bit. These days television is moving back down the continuum in the opposite direction, with character procedurals and basic episodic series dominating much of the airtime. The schism is also reflected in the distinctions between pay cable, basic cable and broadcast television. While pay cable networks like HBO and Showtime still generally rely on the complex serial narrative form, broadcast and basic cable television is heavily populated with traditional series and character procedurals (mythology procedurals are few and far between right now, but these things are cyclical).

**USA Network’s narrative**

I provided this brief historical survey of televisual narrative because I think it contextualizes the place and importance of USA Network’s narrative conventions. Much like the
lead Character’s complicated balance between official and outlaw hero, USA Network’s narrative conventions exist and have larger meaning because of shifts in the recent past. I will address how USA Network’s narrative conventions fit into a larger picture momentarily, but first I must describe what these narrative conventions are.

Programs within the USA Network generic category follow consistent narrative patterns across individual episodes, seasons and entire series. Within the constraints of an individual episode, the majority of the running time is dedicated to a procedural case that will be solved by the episode’s conclusion. These stories allow the lead Characters to show off their unique, helpful skills, permit for some external location shots of the beautiful settings and banter with their family members or supporting friends. Approximately five minutes of each episode – usually some time both at the very beginning and the very end of an episode with an occasional reference in the middle – are dedicated to what I call the “ongoing story.” The ongoing story is typically driven by a mystery that the lead Character tries to solve throughout the duration of not just an individual episode or season, but an entire series. Monk’s search for who killed his wife and Annie Walker’s investigation into why an ex-flame keeps appearing during her CIA fieldwork are both examples that fit the ongoing story bill. At the beginning of an individual episode, the Character addresses a small but important problem he/she must solve in hopes of getting closer to solving the entire ongoing problem. After helping the victim/patient/witness of the week, the Character returns to this small but important problem and usually learns more information that will help him/her solve a substantial part of the ongoing problem. Individual episodes can mix up the actual structure of what kind of case the Character takes on (bank robbery, undercover mission, timed bomb, etc.) and how they solve those issues (costumes, disguises, straightforward wit, etc.), but the general formula is consistent across the entire
generic category. Sometimes season or mid-season finales dispatch of the traditional case and focus more on the ongoing story, but that kind of outlier fits right into the seasonal narrative structure anyway.

To explore a manifestation of this narrative template, I turn to a December 2010 episode of *Burn Notice*, “Dead or Alive.” This episode was the 16th of the series’ fourth season, positioning it close to the season finale (season four had 18 episodes). Season four of *Burn Notice* follows Michael Westen’s journey deeper down the rabbit hole of unofficial government agencies. He has agreed to work for an unnamed organization that works concurrently with more “official” groups like the CIA or FBI in hopes of finding more information about why he was burned. Michael eventually comes across a secret document that unveils the cover identities of evil people, many of whom had a role in burning him.

This brings us to “Dead or Alive.” At the opening of the episode, Michael has agreed to meet with agency handler Marv to turn the document over to the proper authorities, despite some hesitance. By the five-minute mark, Marv is off to figure out the logistics of the intel hand-off and Michael is sidetracked by a “job offer” from his buddy Sam Axe. Sam pitches Michael on the case of a former naval buddy of his who is being charged for crimes he did not commit – a case Michael somewhat reluctantly agrees to help with. The meat of the episode follows Sam and Michael’s attempts to prove the innocence of Sam’s friend, efforts that involve Michael adopting the persona of a Jacksonville drug dealer named Ray. With some goofy Michael Westen accent work, Sam’s lie to the real criminal Pete that his just-murdered friend is still alive and talking to the cops and a makeshift boat explosion, and *Burn Notice* kills another 35 minutes of running time. Michael and Sam set Pete up for the cops and give a little pep talk to the dead friend’s wife, and the procedural story is over. At this point, the episode brings back the ongoing story. Marv
returns, only this time he appears to be visibly uncomfortable and twitchy. After Michael hands off the document (on a jump drive), Marv apologizes before giving it over to the men accompanying him, who he said “threatened to kill his wife.” Within seconds, these men kill Marv and escape in a SUV that is also carrying one of Michael’s most-hated recurring foes, Brennen. The SUV drives away and Michael stands shell-shocked. This *Burn Notice* episode embodies most, if not all, of the basic points of the episode framework the USA Network generic category uses. If focuses on the ongoing story at the very beginning and very end of the episode, but fills up most of the running time with a close-ended procedural story that has an easily understandable beginning, middle and end. “Dead or Alive” allows Michael to show off some of his impressive skills (the fake Ray persona) while simultaneously highlighting the importance and twists of the ongoing story. Michael thinks he has reached some sort of temporary victory in his decision to turn the evil organization in to the official authorities, but he is quickly proven wrong. As the episode ends, it appears that Michael will have to face even more challenges than he initially thought.

The season-long narratives of the programs in the USA Network genre are quite consistent across the board as well. The aforementioned ongoing story that powers entire series has to be broken up and extended so that it can sustain multiple seasons. Therefore, USA Network series break up the ongoing mystery into smaller sub-mysteries. So if a Character is looking for who killed their loved one, each season gets them slightly closer to the murderer’s identity or turns them on to a specific suspect or clue that brings in new information. This sub-mystery presents the possibility of solving the ongoing story, but there is always a new obstacle or twist that prevents resolution. And because USA Network often breaks its series’ seasons into two distinct blocks (say 10 episodes in the summer, six or eight more in the fall or winter), both
the mid-season and season finales build to a cliffhanger where the Character learns an important
detail about the ongoing story that alters his or her perspective. Oftentimes, the mid-season
cliffhanger provides a major twist that is quickly backed away from when a series returns in the
second half of its season. A great example of this approach to narrative is found in the first
season of *White Collar*. The first seven episodes focus on Neal’s search for his missing girlfriend
Kate and how her disappearance might be tied to some of Neal’s past criminal acts. Neal
eventually determines that a mystery man with a fancy ring is involved. In the mid-season finale
“Free Fall,” Kate appears entering her hotel room, only to be met by the man with the fancy ring:
Neal’s straight-laced, by-the-book FBI liaison Peter Burke.¹² This cliffhanger made little sense in
the context of the previous seven episodes and existed only to serve as a cliffhanger. The series
then backed away from any possibility of Peter being “bad” by the first episode of the second
half of the season. Nevertheless, the use of that kind of “gotcha” cliffhanger well exemplifies
how USA Network approaches certain stories.¹³

Generally, the narrative development towards a big cliffhanger in the mid-season is
nearly identical to the narrative build to the end of the season. Meaning, when a USA Networks
series returns for its second half, the lead Character quickly moves on from the major cliffhanger
and tries to use whatever information he/she may have learned from that cliffhanger to resolve
the ongoing problem. The Character gets very close to solving the ongoing mystery or at least
the important sub-mystery in front of them at the moment. However, the Character quickly finds
himself/herself in murky territory yet again and by the time the season ends, he/she is often stuck
in yet another precarious cliffhanger situation. Again returning to *White Collar*’s first season will
help explain this narrative process. After Neal discovers that Peter is not, in fact, working against
him, the two of them continue to track the real man with the fancy ring: a FBI agent named
Fowler. Peter and Neal figure out that Fowler is after a priceless music box, something Fowler—and really everyone else as well—assumes Neal has in his possession from his time as a thief. Fowler uses Kate to try to get the music box and refuses to give her up unless Neal delivers the item. After many lectures from Peter about doing the right thing and moving on with his life, Neal decides to return to his old ways and steal the music box anyway. Once he obtains it, he makes a deal with Fowler: Kate for the music box. With the deal apparently in place, Neal arrives at an airstrip where Kate is waiting for him on a plane. Peter tries to stop Neal from returning to the fugitive life, but before Neal can make a decision, the plane—with Kate inside—explodes.¹⁴

Looking over the full first season of *White Collar* shows us a representation of the basic USA Network seasonal narrative structure. In the first half of the season, the important ongoing mystery is introduced (Neal is looking for his missing girlfriend) and by the mid-season finale, major information is provided (a FBI agent with a fancy ring is somehow involved), but not enough that solves the mystery. In the second half of the season, the first major cliffhanger is challenged (there is a FBI agent involved, but not the one Neal or we thought it was) and more information is divulged (Fowler is the FBI agent, he has Neal’s girlfriend, Neal needs the music box, etc.). By the end of the season, the ongoing mystery appears to be nearing a resolution point (Neal makes a deal with Fowler to save Kate), but at the last minute, a new wrinkle is added that will spur on a new season of stories (Kate’s plane explodes). The second season of *White Collar* follows this narrative pattern as well and integrates even more wrinkles into Neal’s ongoing search. Instead of looking for Kate (who died in the plane explosion), he spends the season searching for her killer, a search that unsurprisingly reveals that Fowler actually has a boss blackmailing him in the same way he treated Kate in season one.¹⁵ And again, *White Collar* is
absolutely reflective of a general pattern within USA Network series. The biggest difference is how each series approaches the ongoing story. In many cases, like *White Collar* and *Burn Notice*, the ongoing story starts with one goal (Michael wants to find who burned him, Neal wants to find Kate) and ultimately shifts to a slightly different, but related goal (Michael wants to find why he was burned, Neal wants to find Kate’s murderer). In other cases, series stick to the same ongoing story throughout. Monk’s multi-season search for his wife’s killer is the most obvious example of this approach. Even other cases, such as *Psych, Covert Affairs, In Plain Sight* and *Royal Pains*, feature ongoing stories that are less mystery-based and more focused on personal relationships with friends, family and ex-lovers. There are questions to be answered, but they are less “mysterious” than those in *Burn Notice, White Collar* and *Monk*. No matter the actual content of the ongoing story, the execution of those stories is relatively similar across series in the USA Network generic category. A few big moments happen a season and the story progresses in some respects, but there is never full resolution.

One final example is worth noting to further paint the picture of USA Network’s narrative patterns. As the only series in the “Characters Welcome” era to actually conclude, *Monk’s* final episode shows us how the USA Network narrative structure expresses end points. Obviously any of the currently running USA Network series could decide to end in entirely different ways (i.e. not resolving the ongoing story), but the shared similarities in episodic and season-long structures tells us that *Monk’s* series finale is likely reflective of how a USA Network series “ends.” After eight seasons and over 120 episodes, “Mr. Monk and the End” sees Monk take on his wife’s murder for a final time. Although his wife had been gone for a very long time, it is not until the final episode that Monk discovers all sorts of new information about the case. The two-part episode has many markers of a conclusion: Monk sees his dead wife’s ghost,
he just happens to be working a crime at the same location where he first heard of her death and also investigates people who are probably associated with the crime. A good chunk of the clues that pushed Monk to solve his wife’s murder are discovered in the final episode. Nevertheless, in the end, Monk solves the crime, appears to have managed his long-running disorders and phobias and learns that his wife’s supposedly-dead daughter is actually still alive.16 The Character continues to work as a consulting detective, but Monk ends on a happy note. There is resolution, both for the Character and the ongoing story.

Hopefully I have shown how these various patterns in narrative structure exist, but it is more important to consider why these patterns exist and what they reflect. The success of USA Network’s series reflects a certain acceptance of its narrative structure as a response to the kind of overly complex super-serials that I mentioned earlier. With pay cable networks like Showtime and HBO relying on the narratively dense, serious serials powered by antiheroes and broadcast networks relying on the somewhat simplistic “series” template defined by close-ended procedural stories, USA Network (and to a lesser extent other basic cable networks like TNT and Syfy) has found much success by creating a formula that strikes a balance between all of the narrative strategies discussed previously. The programs within the USA Network generic category somehow integrate elements of all four major narrative approaches on the continuum: The programs embody the procedural components of the “series”; they allow Characters to have memories and develop relationships amid those procedural stories like the “character procedural”; they similarly weave ongoing stories (or as they are sometimes known, mythologies) with those procedural stories like the “mythology procedural; and they require a certain in-depth attention span to keep up with all the twists and turns to the ongoing story like a “serial.” These narrative approaches are closer together than they appear to be, but USA Network
still does a masterful job of including pieces of each in the narrative conventions of its various programs.

Moreover, I would argue that USA Network has had so much success because it has intelligently picked out the most consumable elements of each narrative strategy when shaping its own style. Whether deliberately or not, USA Network has crafted a plan for its narratives that feels like a response to both the super-serialized era ushered in by pay cable and to the bare-bones procedurals that make up much of the broadcast networks’ schedules. USA Network’s series are serialized, but not too serialized like Lost or The Wire. They are procedural-leaning, but not so procedural that they feature no character development like Law & Order or CSI.

Much like with the construction of the Character in response to the “antihero era,” USA Network’s narrative approach is less “dark” or “dense” than what viewers will find on most pay cable networks, but somewhat more complex or character-based than what they would find on most broadcast network programs. This approach to narrative development might not charm critics and fans looking for the kind of “complexity” and “quality” they would find in something like The Sopranos, but again that feels like USA Network’s entire point. I will once again return to the quote from Burn Notice executive producer Matt Nix, who called USA Network’s offerings “enjoyable” and “apologetic,” but also “hopefully intelligent.” As I discussed in chapter four, USA Network does not want to be HBO and embody exclusivity or the highest of televisual quality. Instead, the network prefers to reflect a certain air of inclusivity and somewhat high quality. USA Network wants to represent fun, middlebrow entertainment and that desire is reflected in the narrative strategy, just as it is in the construction of the Character and branding campaign.
USA Network’s approach to narrative has helped them achieve great success within the industry, but it is also crucial to point out how this narrative scheme reflects the major touchstones of the USA Network brand/genre in escapism, blue skies and inclusivity. The basic structure of an individual episode of a USA Network series is very easy to understand and enjoy. Because most of the episodes devote the majority of their running time to standalone procedural stories that have a resolution, viewers do not have to pay complete attention while watching. They very well can watch *Covert Affairs* with a critical, detail-oriented eye if they like, but that sort of viewing is not necessarily required as it might be while watching complex fare that populates a network like HBO. And when combined with the glamor shots of the destination locations and the attractive casts, it becomes even easier to immerse oneself into the visually appealing and somewhat intellectually stimulating world of a USA Network series. Even though most USA Network series have an ongoing storyline that breaks up the weekly procedural story, those beats follow a conventional pattern that makes for similarly simple consumption and understanding. Veteran viewers now know that Michael Westen or Neal Caffrey are repeatedly going to come *this* close to solving their current problems before having the rug pulled out from underneath them in some way. And because most episodes relegate the ongoing story to the very beginning and end of their running time, viewers old and new can easily catch up or learn about what is going on. The beats of the ongoing story are often repeated over and over so that it is hard not to know the details. Or, in the off-chance the viewer would prefer to just sit back and enjoy the procedural plot without worrying about the ongoing story at all, it is conveniently bracketed off. Moreover, the ongoing story has a classic pulp fiction feel to it where every week, the lead Characters face some sort of dangerous cliffhanger that the following episode can quickly back away from before heading into that week’s case. This sort of approach to
storytelling helps keep the audience invested (and presumably, keeps them coming back for more in subsequent weeks), but also does not require much critical analysis to comprehend. Many of the episodes blend together and feel very similar when viewed in a larger bunch, but that kind of familiarity makes for an easy, lightweight and fun viewing experience.

There is a reliability to the USA Network narrative structure on every level, from episodic to season- or series-long patterns. At this point, audiences know exactly what to expect from each series within the generic category and those expectations are rarely ever subverted. The lack of variation does not faze audiences. The success of all of USA Network’s series suggests they enjoy escaping into the typical, comfortable rhythms of Michael Westen’s goofy accents or Monk’s nervous tics. Certain critics have taken USA Network to task for their ongoing story structure.¹⁸ This includes myself, as I called the construction of the ongoing story in most USA Network stories “pointless” in August 2010 column for my television criticism web site, but I have now come to realize that the pointless-ness is kind of the point to begin with.¹⁹ Although one (as I did) might say that USA Network’s series lack “true” dramatic stakes because the current obstacle is always replaced with another one as the lead Characters make their way towards an ultimate resolution, we could just as easily say that the aforementioned lack of stakes only furthers USA Network’s escapist ideology. If main Characters were ever in true danger, or worse, were actually killed, USA Network would not really be the place for escapist, summer-y television. The presumed joy in programming like USA Network’s is that viewers know that the lead Characters are never really in danger and that they will be back next week to help people and crack wise. Thus, this lack of stakes actually helps USA Network underscore the light-heartedness and fun of its brand image and generic category, and also allows the network to position itself against the likes of the more dramatic HBO programming that has “true” stakes.
The narrative approach of the USA Network generic category also reinforces the blue skies ambiance of the network’s brand image. Good nearly always triumphs over evil in the narratives of USA Network series. Almost every episode’s weekly case ends on a positive note, with the good guy/gal protagonist saving the day in whatever method they ultimately deem necessary. Criminals have been stopped, medical emergencies have been attended to and innocent lives have been saved. Though the ongoing story might throw an air of mystery, suspense or danger over the proceedings, the prominent procedural stories in each episode conclude on a more upbeat note. There is a sense that no matter the problem, the lead Character(s) will figure things out and make the lives of the innocent and helpless better. Maybe a boat blows up or someone gets shot in the arm, but ultimately, the wrongs are regularly righted. This continually optimistic and positive conclusion reflects a certain blue sky attitude that USA Network wants to put forth to the audience. The narrative structure presents regular challenges to the blue sky vibe, but the lead Characters always figure out a way to squash that challenge (usually with their exceptional skills). Even though the larger problem often inflicts hardship onto the Characters, the narrative structure finds ways to give them moments of respite and success from said hardship. Michael Westen still has not quite figured out all the details of why or how he was burned; however, he has clarified a good chunk of the picture. There is always another trial to tackle, but reaching those new trials means succeeding in the previous ones. Despite all the evil, danger and illegality surrounding the lead Characters, they still look forward and they still succeed in stopping bad things from happening on a regular basis. This nature of the narrative reinforces the blue skies ideology.

Finally, the narrative structure of USA Network’s series reflects the brand/genre’s emphasis on inclusivity. Because USA Network series’ narratives follow a rather common,
conventional and familiar pattern, audiences are very aware of how stories develop when they tune in. Viewers’ expectations are met on a regular basis and that kind of comfortability with a series or a set of series helps make USA Network content very accessible. Whereas the complex and dense storytelling of HBO programming such as *The Sopranos* or *The Wire* basically requires full attention every week, USA Network’s easily visible narrative conventions ask very little of the audience. Those series tend to close themselves off to uninitiated viewers, while USA Network’s narrative construction more or less welcomes them. Furthermore, I would argue that the basic narrative function of each series’ weekly episodes highlights inclusivity. Every week, USA Network series present the audience with a mystery of some kind, whether it is a murder, a legal case, a bank robbery or a medical emergency. Throughout the episode, the Character and the audience are given helpful information about how to solve this pressing issue and although the Character often solves said issues with his/her impressive skills, the audience can still play the role of armchair spy/detective/doctor/mediator in the comfort of their own home. There is clearly no way to tell how much value viewers put in their ability to “play along,” but the formulaic and repetitive nature of the weekly narrative of USA Network series is certainly more applicable to that kind of viewing experience than more complex, super-serialized programs are. Certain series, like *Burn Notice*, *Psych* and *Monk*, take this one step further by including certain elements within the story that accentuate the viewers’ ability to play along at home: *Burn Notice*’s Michael Westen regularly explains his MacGyver-esque makeshift plans to the audience through step-by-step voiceover; when *Psych*’s Shawn Spencer “sees” something he thinks is important to his investigation, the camera zooms in on that object while it brightly glows and most *Monk* episodes feature a “Here’s What Happened” sequence where Monk explicitly (and
arguably, didactically) explains how that week’s crime was committed. Nevertheless, the general structure of USA Network’s series allows the viewers to feel a part of the proceedings.

The narrative structure of the series within the USA Network generic category follow clear patterns, but like so many other things related to USA Network in the “Characters Welcome” era, formulaic patterns seem to appeal greatly to viewers. USA Network’s ability to craft offerings that balance the vague series/serial distinctions (and the even more muddled character procedural/mythology procedural distinctions) is likely one of the biggest reasons that the network has been successful in recent years. The narrative structure of most USA Network programs allow for a lightweight, but satisfying respite from both the densely dark fare on pay cable and the frivolous character-light programming on broadcast television. As a result, the narrative structure is yet another way in which USA Network positions itself as solid middlebrow entertainment that nearly anyone can enjoy. More importantly, USA Network’s approach to narrative in individual episodes, whole seasons and entire series reflect the big, overall meanings of the brand image and generic category. Like the brand campaign and the construction of the Character, USA Network’s narratives emphasize escapism, blue skies and inclusivity in appealing, easily consumable ways. The narrative structure is yet another way that USA Network makes certain that viewer experience across all things USA Network is identical. The settings and Characters may change, but the approach to narrative development is basically the same. Just as they do when they see a new commercial featuring a new Character, audiences and critics know what to expect in regards to how a USA Network series establishes its narrative. The network’s patterned, standardized narrative structure is yet another textual element that works in cohesion with the branding campaign and audience and critic response to further solidify the discourse about USA Network, and thus, the USA Network generic category.
NOTES

2 Greg M. Smith’s work on televisual narrative is some of the most well-known and well-respected and his first piece on the narrative patterns in *Seinfeld* was published in 1995. I do not intend to produce a historical survey of all the articles written on the subject of television narrative, but I thought it was useful to point out that this topic is still somewhat new and ignored by scholars. See: Greg M. Smith, “Plotting a Show About Nothing: Patterns of Narration in Seinfeld,” *Creative Screenwriting* 2.3 (Fall 1995): 82-90.
4 Smith, “A Case of Cold Feet: Serial Narration and the Character Arc,” 84.
11 *Burn Notice*, “Dead or Alive,” USA Network, 9 December 2010.
15 *White Collar*, “Point Blank” USA Network, 7 September 2010.
CONCLUSION. THE ‘HAPPY TIME NETWORK’: CONSIDERING USA NETWORK’S SUCCESS

The “Characters Welcome” era has been filled with one success after another for USA Network. Every scripted series developed with the blue skies brand filter in mind has caught on with audiences, the Character-centric branding campaign does not appear to be coming to an end and the fun, escapist and inclusive feelings just keep flowing. Even though USA Network’s new 2011 series *Fairly Legal*, *Suits* and *Necessary Roughness* took hits with the critical community, they garnered enough audience support to receive second season pick-ups⁴ (albeit with a “creative retooling” in the case of *Fairly Legal*²). Although on the surface these renewals are not particularly surprising considering USA Network’s prior track record, the success of all three new series suggests that the network’s programming formula and brand imagery can extend to series that are not about crime solvers. *Royal Pains*’ success hinted at this previously, but three more hits basically confirm that USA Network’s audience is willing to embrace any series the cable power pumps out. In the meantime, USA Network announced that it has plans to further expand its programming stable to different projects, including a number of half-hour comedies and a daily talk show, two formats the network has not tried in the “Characters Welcome” era.³ In late 2011, USA Network provided nearly $10 billion in profit to NBCU’s bottom line (compared to NBC’s $408 million contribution) and the network ended 2011 as the highest-rated cable network for the sixth straight year.⁴ There appears to be no limit to the number of similarly-themed USA Network series that audiences will embrace. And even though there are indications that USA Network executives want to step outside of the blue sky-covered box just a bit, they are very aware of the network’s successes. In a November 2011 interview, USA
Network co-presidents Jeff Watchtel and Chris McCumber described the blessings and the curses of the brand/genre’s success:

“Anyone who has success with a specific thing probably becomes a little sensitized to it because people are always parroting it back. Our joke on the scripted side is, ‘If we hear one more surfing-detective pitch, we're going to kill ourselves.’ So it's not that we're not that [blue skies-focused], it's that we like to believe we're more than that. …Whether or not the name ‘USA’ travels, certainly the brand and type of programming does.”

Critics may be less enamored with the new USA Network offerings and the programming slate as a whole, but as I hope has been made apparent throughout this project, that matters less to USA Network as network, as a brand and as a generic category.

Most importantly, USA Network has figured out a way to combine a programming formula and a brand image in its journey to the top of basic cable television. Everything, from the television commercials and print ads to tweets to the episodes of programming themselves, exudes sunshine-soaked, blue skied escapism that welcomes everyone into USA Network’s world of colorful, uncommon Characters. Each different arm of production and promotion is aligned under the “Characters Welcome” umbrella and it shows. For audiences, experiencing USA Network on any media platform is basically the same, aesthetically and thematically. And thanks to the internet, we can see that critics and at least a certain section of the audience are very, very aware of what USA Network is doing and how they have achieved substantial success in the television industry over the last seven years. Critics and angry commenters might write USA Network programming off as “undemanding,” “mindless,” “pleasant” and “predictable,” but the network embraces those descriptors and builds their entire brand image around them.
Both sides use the same kinds of words and executives happen to see USA Network’s undemanding-ness and pleasantness as great qualities. USA Network has now reached an impressive level of awareness. Just as they know exactly what to expect when they hear the terms “soap opera” or “cop show,” audiences and critics are acutely aware of precisely what a “USA Network series” is. Some think this is a good thing, others view it in a more negative, predictable light, but nevertheless, we now have a great awareness of USA Network programming and promotions. In that regard, I argue we can view USA Network as its own separate generic category that is powered by a specific set of conventions, inventions and an overall ideological meaning.

What this means for the television industry is still somewhat unclear. In the years before USA Network’s triumphs, networks like HBO and Showtime achieved new heights and brand awareness with their programming. Both were built upon the antihero trend and while HBO positioned itself as the premiere place for “Not TV” content, Showtime seemed fine to provide stranger, but still “quality” programming (you have to pay, after all). And of course we cannot forget the targeted, niche successes of smaller cable networks like HGTV, The Food Network, Bravo or the much larger successes in the world of news found on ESPN, MSNBC and Fox News. Even before USA Network developed the “Characters Welcome” campaign, cable networks were using branding, and many were doing a satisfactory job of it. Yet as Nielsen ratings decline and audience attention is taken up by more and more non-television related media, there is value in looking at the achievements of USA Network in the “Characters Welcome” era.

I would argue that USA Network’s accomplishments are being most mimicked by networks dealing with a similar sort of programming and audience scale. Meaning, the larger,
relatively popular basic cable networks that populate nearly every single cable package in the United States. Networks that fit this description include, but are not limited to TNT, TBS, Syfy, Lifetime, ABC Family, The Disney Channel, Discovery, TLC, The History Channel and FX. These networks are well-established (though Syfy and ABC Family have undergone name and identity changes), but they have only relatively recently begun to shape their programming around a specific brand ideology or theme. Those branding initiatives have involved narrowing the target audience (TBS’s focus on comedy programming and the “Very Funny” slogan, TNT’s focus on quasi-retro procedurals top-lined by a strong lead character, not unlike USA Network’s approach), broadening the target audience (Syfy’s name change came with a directive to avoid too much “science fiction-y” programming, ABC Family’s recent scripted output hints at attempts to grab the teenage girl audience once charmed by the now-defunct WB Network) or a general dedication to providing more scripted programming altogether (Lifetime and The Disney Channel have certainly beefed up their offerings lately). I would also argue that the success of USA Network and branding in general are present on the broadcast networks as well. Now aware that the era of the massive, broad audience is over, broadcast networks have begun narrowing their focus as well. ABC is widely-known as a network that targets older women. The WB-UPN replacement the CW tries to target teen girls. Despite its struggles, NBC wants to provide content for the more affluent, hipper audience group. And as I discussed in the introduction, CBS has had a substantial amount of success appealing to older, somewhat conservative viewers in the heartland. It is really impossible to tell how much of a role USA Network’s big victories have had in the push for more specific audience targeting and overarching brand campaigns, but it is obvious to see that those two things now play a large role in how television operates in the 21st century. USA Network happens to have had some of the greatest successes with a brand image-
centric plan – mostly because its programming and brand image are so thematically and aesthetically linked – but it was neither the first to use such a plan, nor will it be the last.

For the industry, USA Network’s blending of formula and branding is nothing but a triumph. But what about for audiences and culture at large? Thus far, my analysis of the network’s “Characters Welcome” branding campaign has been purposefully uncritical. I chose to save my criticisms of this campaign because it would be too complicated and messy to attempt to address ideas of commodification in the midst of sketching out distinctions between formula and genre or series and serial (processes that are themselves complicated and messy). It would be foolish to assume that using a branding campaign to shape discursive assumptions about a stable of content is a fully idealistic and harmless maneuver. USA Network has definitely created an innovative branding campaign that taps into specific psychological values. However, I am not naïve enough to ignore the primary reason that this brand image was developed: To make money. Obviously, the USA Network wants to have as many viewers as possible and, of course, more viewers equal more advertising revenue. And USA Network has succeeded mightily with the “Characters Welcome” campaign. It helped the network bring in over $1 billion in advertising revenue in 2009, which topped competitors such as TNT and TBS.\(^7\) Although I would like to think there is more going on with USA Network’s brand/genre building (especially considering the public service-leaning Character Approved and Unite campaigns), USA Network clearly reaps the benefits of its smart branding practices. Plus, USA Network’s place inside the massive Comcast-NBC Universal conglomerate means that it is just another line on the long balance sheet (the most successful line, according to a 2011 Wall Street Journal story\(^8\)) where it has to answer for its costs with many more benefits.
Concerns about the creation of formula and genre in relation to economics are widespread. Three major criticisms will be addressed in this section: Standardization, pseudo-individualization and commodification. I have already touched on how Feuer, Altman and Mittell see genres as culturally constructed, which implies that they reflect and produce certain cultural beliefs and meanings. However, it also implies that genres can be manufactured to organize audience taste and create the highest possible profits. This criticism does not escape Cawelti’s conception of formula either, as David Paul Nord argues:

“[F]ormulas are largely the creation of producers rather than audiences, that producers frequently are not under strong market pressures from audiences, and hence formulas are, if anything, more likely to reflect producers’ rather than audiences’ values.”

Similar arguments have been made about how genres are organized and viewed in popular media. The “ideological approach” to genre discussed by both Rick Altman and Thomas Schatz posits that media industries and producers have the most power in creating and sustaining genres, leaving audiences with little say in how genres exist or how successful they are. The arguments of these scholars are obvious, but important. Clearly USA Network did not create the “Characters Welcome” slogan out for charitable purposes or even because audiences were clamoring for it. Moreover, consideration should be made for what USA Network has been able to do since the branding campaign was introduced. A critical view of USA Network’s brand image would suggest that “Characters Welcome” has been used as a blanket term to gloss over the network’s continuous airing of new programming that is barely differentiated from content it already has. In general, an argument could be made that USA Network’s programming is totally standardized, to use a word from Theodore Adorno and his discussions of the popular music
Though I have been primarily working from Cawelti’s view of formula, less positive views from scholars like Nord and Adorno apply to USA Network’s programming and branding practices. In more negative eyes, “formula” is just another word for “standardization,” so if USA Network’s programming all fits a specific formula as I have argued, it probably fits a certain definition of standardization as well. As Adorno suggests in his dismissal of popular music, standardization “guarantees that regardless if aberrations occur, the hit will lead back to the same familiar experience, and nothing fundamentally novel will be introduced.”

This analysis of popular music can be applied to both USA Network’s programming and branding strategies. Since the “Characters Welcome” campaign began in 2005, the network has introduced slightly different versions of its programming and promotional templates, but these new versions still hold on to the major features of USA Network’s formulas. A new series might star a female instead of a male and a new commercial might give away more plot details than normal, but that female-led series will still “feel” like a USA Network series and that commercial will still be edited and shot to emphasize sun-drenched locales and beautiful people. The same can be said in reference to the ideological approach to genre studies. If we are to assume that industry forces (in this case, USA Network) are the primary player in the activation and definition of this new generic category, that leaves less room for audiences and critics to shape how the generic category is expressed and interpreted. USA Network has clearly been able to create very specific conventions for the generic category and audiences more or less expect those conventions to be upheld. The consistent re-appearance of most conventions and the success of USA Network’s series featuring those conventions tell us that audiences have fully embraced this product. In a negative light, this makes the audiences seem something like sheep. USA Network’s product has
been standardized to appeal to the largest group of viewers, allowing them to make the most money – and it has worked.

I have established that USA Network’s programming and branding tap into a few psychological values: The desire of audience members to feel like Characters and their similar desire to escape. Although the popularity of series featuring these values is a substantial victory for USA Network’s program development and marketing departments, there are issues that can arise by locking into individual or group desires. The network’s ability to make people feel like they, too, as idiosyncratic, odd people can be cool Characters presents us an intriguing example of Adorno’s pseudo-individualization. In his criticisms of the popular music industry, Adorno notes that pseudo-individualization is created by the presumption of the listener having free choice and taste. However, Adorno argues that free choice and taste are just facades, pacifying listeners into feeling more powerful and individualistic, despite the fact that most music is actually standardized (and in his mind, awful).\textsuperscript{14} A critical view of the “Characters Welcome” campaign could come to similar conclusions. By inviting audience members and making them feel like they are also Characters, USA Network has either been able to keep those viewers from recognizing that all of the network’s series are similar or convinced them that the similarities do not matter (based on my exploration of the comments sections, I would say it is more the latter). The “Characters Welcome” campaign makes the standardization obvious; it is celebrated. However, because that standardization is entrenched in such a strong psychological value of wanting to feel special, audiences are perhaps less concerned that they are embracing a homogenous product that offers little variation. Adorno would say that the brand image empowers the audience into thinking they have the power to choose to watch this programming,
even though they really do not, a move that puts the audience in a somewhat faulty position of power.

The “Characters Welcome” era has not only tapped into viewers’ desire to feel different, but also their desire to escape to beautiful places full of attractive people and not a care in the world. Adorno and Max Horkheimer attack this delivery of “escape” in their seminal work, “The Culture Industry.” The two argue that desires particularly escape, are created fully by industry:

“Amusement always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display. At its root is powerlessness. It is indeed escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality.”¹⁵

Although obviously overly negative and critical of the entertainment industry, Adorno and Horkheimer’s attacks are grounded in reality. As I have already mentioned, it is difficult to determine exactly why every person consumes a specific text. However, the popularity of USA Network’s series combined with the generic category’s celebration of escapism suggests that the people watching want to embrace the ideals the series are promoting. To tap into the audiences’ desires, USA Network has used its series and branding campaign to commodify ideas of escape and summer. The network has taken those broad concepts and continuously presented them as specific aesthetic signposts. The constant use of wide, establishing shots of the ocean, the beach or the skyline are recurring signs that connote “escape” and “summer” to the viewers. As I have shown through analysis of both branding and programming formulas, USA Network rarely, if ever, presents content without sunshine, ocean water or skylines. When those three elements are not specifically highlighted, they are still present in some form while other signs can take their place in the limelight. For example, in the Burn Notice-Royal Pains commercial I discussed in
chapter three, there are no focused shots of the beach, the water or the skyline. Nevertheless, there are direct mentions of sunglasses and sunscreen, two things that certainly make the audience think of the sun, the beach or the ocean. Meanwhile, the ocean and blue sky are visible in the far background. Because USA Network is a commercial network, part of a major media conglomerate, it is obviously looking to make money, so its constant use of these signs could be interpreted as commodification. To take this discussion further, the positive response to USA Network’s programming and branding initiatives, which are full of these commodified signs, could be seen as a form of commodity fetishism. There is very little determinable use value in a group of television series that presents commodified signs of escape and summer. Yet the audience’s positive reception to the USA Network generic category suggests that there is some exchange value present. For the series to be successful people have to watch them and to watch them, they have to pay for cable. Therefore, fans of USA Network’s programming have let the exchange value overtake the use value, fitting into Adorno and Horkheimer’s definitions of the cultural applications of commodity fetishism.¹⁶

When there is money to be made, it is always smart to assume that money is the driving force in decision making. In that regard, USA Network’s programming and branding practices certainly gloss over a formulaic or standardized product, make the viewers feel more individual than perhaps they should and also partially commodify the ideals of escape and summer. These are valid criticisms; however, I do not choose to be as negative as Adorno and Horkheimer or even Nord. Although I think USA Network holds a lot of power in how it is defined as a brand, formula and genre, I do not think the network is in complete control. People are not mindless sheep fully organized by industrial factors. The individuals who watch USA Network and buy into its ideals as a brand and as a genre of programming have made conscious choices to do so.
Yes, they have probably disregarded the fact that USA Network’s programming is fairly standardized or, perhaps, embraced that standardization. Yes, they can – and have – respond to a great branding campaign by feeling like they themselves are the Characters just like the fictional ones on television. And finally, yes, they have perhaps clung too tightly to commodified ideas of escape and summer. But no matter what kind of impact USA Network’s branding-fueled transition from formula to genre has had on individual viewers, at a certain point, those viewers made a choice that started them on a path to viewership. Therefore, as we return to Mittell’s assumptions about genres as cultural categories, we know that genres are activated by discourse. It does not happen just in the text, but it also does not happen just because the industrial factors say so. Networks and media companies might have substantial impact on the creation of new generic categories, but audiences must respond the network’s “Characters Welcome” initiatives for it to truly work. Furthermore, critics must examine the network, the brand and the various series to keep the discourse alive. Audiences and critics might not have a lot of power to shape genres, but they certainly have some.

In today’s television landscape, networks and producers are turning to more overt branding techniques to attract the attention of an extremely fragmented and impatient audience. Branding campaigns like those developed by USA Network might tap a little deeper into ideological and emotional desires than past network slogans or gimmicks, but it is unclear what else the power players within the industry could do to find success in the 21st century. The lines between art and commerce might be more blurred than ever before, but I am not really sure that is necessarily a bad thing. Ultimately, we could choose to read initiatives like USA Network’s “Characters Welcome” as emotionally manipulative, formulaic and standardized and we would probably be right in most respects. But that kind of criticism takes away the agency of the
audience. And despite the ways that media producers such as USA Network play on our desires, we still have the final say. If we do not like something, we can turn it off or choose to ignore it all together. If people want to escape from the fears of terrorism, economic collapse or disease in the sunny, blue sky world of USA Network’s Characters, they should have the right to do so.

And based on USA Network’s success, it is clear that audiences have wanted to do just that.

NOTES

5 Rose, “How USA Co-Presidents Will Move Beyond the ‘Blue Skies’ Programming.”