Audience Gratifications and Broadcast Television Networks:
A Study of Media Fragmentation

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ABSTRACT

AUDIENCE GRATIFICATIONS AND BROADCAST TELEVISION NETWORKS: A STUDY OF MEDIA FRAGMENTATION

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With the proliferation of new media, United States broadcast television networks have watched the former core television audience fragment into a number of smaller interest- and value-specific audiences. According to the uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974), members of this fragmenting audience are actively selecting which media outlets best serve their personal gratifications and needs. The seven major broadcast television networks in the U.S. – Fox, NBC, ABC, CBS, WB, UPN and i (PAX) – have adopted several strategies to re-attract and retain viewers in a fragmented media landscape. The following analysis of four network strategies indicates the limited effectiveness of current network strategies to improve viewership, and proposes changes to the broadcast network model and the uses and gratifications theory.
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References
I. The Negative Impact of Media Fragmentation on Television

The Broadcast Television Network Model vs. Cable/Satellite Television System Model

Four major factors place a distinct divide between broadcast television networks and cable/satellite television channels: economics, audience demographics, amount of original programming and indecency standards. More so than cable/satellite television channels, the seven major broadcast television networks in the United States – Fox, NBC, ABC, CBS, WB, UPN and i (PAX) – rely upon advertising revenue to continue broadcasting programs. For broadcasters’ profits are based upon creating audiences that appeal to advertisers, not programs that appeal to viewers (Eastman & Ferguson, 2006). While cable/satellite systems are not quite as reliant on advertiser revenue, these systems still require advertiser support to defray the remainder of costs not covered by subscriber or user fees (Eastman et al., 2006). Due to this strong reliance on advertising revenue, broadcast networks are forced to create and broadcast programming to appeal to the largest possible audience. By programming to the mass audience, broadcast television networks often sacrifice quality for advertiser support. In fact, broadcast networks can only deliver high quality programming to audiences through increased costs or special one-time events (Eastman et al., 2006). Faced with advertiser-driven economic pressures, broadcast television networks have been forced to program according to “the fast food analogy: plenty of food, low cost, but not a wide selection, and certainly not the quality you might desire” (Eastman et al., 2006).

Since broadcast television channels are more broadly available than cable/satellite channels, broadcast networks have been able to charge higher advertising rates for larger
audience coverage. Currently, broadcast networks reach 100% of television households; cable, satellite and “alternative delivery systems” reach approximately 80% of U.S. homes (Webster, 2005). In the past, networks have been able to achieve strong audience share through broader availability in homes. For instance, in 1985, the combined prime-time shares for ABC, CBS and NBC accounted for 69.3% of all television viewing (Webster, 2005). However, between declining audiences and skyrocketing advertising rates, broadcast television networks are quickly losing the interest of top advertisers. In the same comparison of prime-time network shares among all television households, “as of the 2002-2003 season, their [the Big Three networks’] total had dropped to 29%” (Webster, 2005). As for individual network viewing, “whereas a broadcast network might once have expected to command 30% or 40% of those watching television, it is now fortunate to have audience shares in the double digits” (Webster, 2005).

Advertisers are also taking note of the declining audience coverage of broadcast television networks by reducing their budgets for television advertising. Between 2004 and 2005, advertising revenue for ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN and WB declined from $22.37 billion to $22.3 billion as six of the top 10 advertisers from 2004 (as measured by TNS Media Intelligence) decreased their advertising budgets (Atkinson, 2006a). However, this reduction in advertising spending by no means indicates the fall of broadcast network advertising rates. Even with cable audience ratings creeping increasingly closer to network audience ratings, advertisers are still allocating larger budgets to the networks because networks offer national coverage and audience viewership unparalleled by cable channels (Schmuckler, 2005).
As its greater economic reliance on advertisers indicates, the broadcast television network business model was created to appeal to a mass audience, an audience who shares the same basic values and interests. Advertisers seeking broad-range appeal for their products and services view broadcast television networks as an important advertising medium. “Network television can surmount differences of age, sex, education and lifestyle that would ordinarily segregate people into many separate subaudiences” (Eastman et al., 2006). Cable/satellite television systems, on the other hand, were created to provide a variety of “niche networks” to appeal to a range of smaller, more specific audiences.

While the main genres of television programming – “situation comedies (sitcoms), dramas, news, talk, music, reality, sports, and movies” (Eastman et al., 2006) – are broadcast on both network and cable/satellite channels, the time of the program’s broadcast and the program’s content are dependent on the specific channel’s audience orientation. Broadcast television networks air programs during times that are compatible with the “‘typical’ lifestyles of their audiences,” meaning network television employs the “dayparting” strategy to match its different types of programming to different parts of the day (Eastman et al., 2006). For example, soap operas are broadcast during the afternoon hours (12 p.m. to 4 p.m.) for housewives, and news programs are broadcast during the early morning hours (6 a.m. to 9 a.m.) for the American with the traditional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday. With more narrowly targeted audiences, cable/satellite channels have a different approach to creating compatibility between audience lifestyles and television programming. Since cable and satellite systems offer more channels, they can more
precisely target programming than dayparting. Cable and satellite channels can air programming to meet the needs of smaller audiences with different lifestyles than the networks’ housewives and businesspersons. “They can cater to the night-shift worker with sports at 6 a.m., to the single person household with movies at 6 p.m., to the teenager with round-the-clock videos, by using a different channel to serve each interest” (Eastman et al., 2006).

Broadcast television networks and cable/satellite channels are also distinctly divided in the amount of original programming. In contrast to the Big Four broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox), which offer original programming throughout their schedules, the majority of smaller networks and cable/satellite channels offer only a limited amount of original programming each season (Eastman et al., 2006). Constrained by smaller production budgets, the majority of cable channels produce between one and two original series per year (Eastman et al., 2006). Furthermore, even if a program receives critical acclaim, the cable channel will still receive only a small amount of viewership in comparison to broadcast network competitors (Eastman et al., 2006). However, cable channels have consciously made the decision to provide a limited amount of original programming as part of the cable channel business model. Television viewers expect more original programming from the already saturated broadcast networks, but do not expect as much original programming from cable channels that more closely meet their particular needs. Therefore, by offering original programming in the format and time slots viewers prefer – whether prime-time, morning, afternoon or late-night – cable channels can offer a limited amount of original programming and still meet viewer needs.
Differing indecency standards also influence how effectively broadcast television networks and cable/satellite channels are able to match programming with audience lifestyles and interests. Broadcast television networks are regulated by Title 18 of the United States Code, Section 1464, which prohibits the utterance of “any obscene, indecent or profane language by means of radio communication” (Federal Communications Commission, 2005). In order to protect children who may be influenced by indecent programming, the FCC has ruled that indecent material may not be broadcast over public airwaves from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. (Federal Communications Commission, 2005). This regulation prevents broadcast television networks from broadcasting material that “depicts or describes sexual or excretory organs or activities in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium” (Federal Communications Commission, 2005).

Cable and satellite channels, on the other hand, are not forced to comply with similar federal regulations dictating the type of programming they may offer audiences. In the absence of these restrictions, cable and satellite channels are able to satisfy audiences seeking programming with more sexual and violent content than the programming permissible on broadcast networks. However, cable operators are facing increasing pressure from federal lawmakers, the Federal Communications Commission and consumer advocacy groups to reduce the amount of offensive content and respond to consumer demand to make “objectionable” programs less accessible (Shiver, 2005). In response to this war on television indecency, Time Warner and Comcast – the nation's two largest cable operators – and Insight Communications, Advance/Newhouse
Communications Inc., Bresnan Communications and Midcontinent Media Inc. are planning to offer subscribers “family-friendly” channel packages in 2006 (Shiver, 2005). Kyle McSlarrow, president of the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, proposed these packages as an alternative to stricter federal regulations on cable operators. In these family-friendly cable packages, “the six cable operators would allow subscribers to swap their channel lineup for one that would eliminate edgier channels and instead feature over-the-air stations combined with such family offerings as Disney's ABC Family, the Disney Channel and Viacom's Nickelodeon” (Shiver, 2005).

**Catalysts and Development of Media Fragmentation**

Media fragmentation explains “a process by which the mass audience, one which was once concentrated on three or four viewing options, becomes more widely distributed. As a result, the average channel audience becomes smaller” (Webster, 2005). The growth in media outlets in the late twentieth century has led to fragmentation of the former mass audience into numerous smaller, more interest- and value-driven audiences – reducing individual outlet viewership in the process. Shrinking audiences impact not only the economic stability of the media industry but also the functional organization of media outlets, from radio and television to newspapers, magazines and the Internet. While media fragmentation began to emerge as a notable force as early as the 1980s, it has gradually developed into an irreversible phenomenon placing pressure on the media industry to change its traditional structure or risk the permanent loss of audience interest and trust.

The development of U.S. media in the twentieth century can be explained through
five historical stages – the partisan media, commercial media, objective media, interpretative media and fragmented media (West, 2001). In the 1960s and 1970s, before the tipping point for media fragmentation, the mass media were characterized as “an elite club dominated by a small number of leaders and a patrician sense of responsibility for the industry” (West, 2001). Industry leaders controlled the news by determining what was newsworthy; and smaller news outlets followed the example of these more respected and financially solvent rulers of the marketplace in their news coverage (West, 2001).

However, with the introduction of new technology and the arrival of more competitors in the news media, this “elite club” gradually began to dissolve in the 1980s before rapidly dissolving in the 1990s (West, 2001). The introduction of numerous new media channels allowed viewers to be more selective in choosing media. “Along with talk radio, music videos, local news, and the World Wide Web, new networks and a profusion of cable channels would expand the viewing and listening options available to citizens – changes that dramatically altered the industry. The clubby world of ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS gave way to nearly one hundred television channels” (West, 2001). These new channels offered niche programming previously unavailable to audiences on the mass audience-driven broadcast networks. The World Wide Web, introduced in the early 1990s, also provided a more targeted and personalized alternative to traditional broadcast network television outlets. This growth in media outlets – and the corresponding expansion of media perspectives and increased frequency of publicizing journalist biases – led to a growing move toward heterogeneous, rather than homogenous, news coverage (West, 2001).
While media fragmentation has impacted media outlets from print to broadcast, its effects on broadcast television networks are a prime example of how changes in audience orientation have dramatically altered the traditional twentieth century media paradigm. Before cable television, satellite television and digital video recording (DVR) technology, broadcast television networks attracted and held the attention of the majority of Americans during the evening. In fact, Veronis Suhler (1994) reports that ABC, CBS and NBC accounted for more than 90% of all American prime-time television viewing in 1977 (Webster, 2005). However, between 1979 and 1987, the cable penetration rate increased from 20% to 50% of U.S. households and the VCR penetration rate increased from 2% to 50% of U.S. households (Butsch, 2000, p. 269). These technological advances negatively impacted the combined prime-time shares of ABC, CBS and NBC, with the networks’ shares falling from 69.3% in 1985 to 29% by 2002 (Webster, 2005). Thus, through the past twenty five years, the dominance of broadcast television networks over other entertainment and news media has been reduced to one third of the networks’ original audience share.

Media fragmentation’s drastic impact on broadcast television networks can be attributed to several societal factors – including the emergence of new television and Internet technology, and audience expectations for media interactivity, individual viewer control and time-shifting of messages (referred to as asynchroneity). Both the growing number of television channels and newer television technology have altered the television viewing habits of Americans, providing more choices for viewers to decide what and when to watch television.
Over the past 25 years, technological innovations have provided television viewers with access to an increasing number of channels and an increasing number of devices to use when viewing those channels.

Between cable television, direct broadcast satellites, and other “alternative delivery systems,” over 80% of U.S. homes now have access to more than just local broadcasters. [...] When one considers the burgeoning numbers of VCRs, DVDs, PVRs, and newer broadband delivery systems, the typical American TV viewer functions in an ever more abundant, at least numerically, multichannel environment (Webster, 2005).

In fact, Nielsen Media Research reports the number of channels of programming available to the average American household has increased from 33 channels in 1990 to over 100 in 2003 (Webster, 2005).

By creating more choices for television viewers, cable and satellite channels have reduced viewership and ratings for broadcast television networks. According to the Cabletelevision Advertising Bureau, “2003 was the second year in which ad-supported cable networks earned higher ratings and shares than the seven broadcast networks. The bureau said the dozens of available cable networks averaged a 49.6 share for the 2002-2003 season while the broadcast networks averaged a 45.0 share” (Stoff, 2004). Nielsen explains network television’s declining audience popularity as an annual 2% decline in the network television audience from 1995-2005 – a significant reduction in viewership when compared to the U.S. population growth of 30 million people during this same period (Garfield, 2005). Tumbling audience shares for broadcast networks have also been
recorded during traditionally popular television sweeps periods. During the February
2005 sweeps period, cable television celebrated the first time that its viewership exceeded
the broadcast network audience (Garfield, 2005).

Since the late 1970s reign of broadcast television networks, the advent of VCRs,
DVD players, DVR devices and video-on-demand (VOD) technology has created several
alternatives to broadcast television networks. Both VCRs and DVD players allow
audiences to watch movies and television shows at the time of their choice. By providing
an alternative to live broadcast television networks, VCRs and DVD players increase
viewer flexibility and control over programming content and time. Led by ReplayTV and
TiVo, DVRs entered the television marketplace in 1999. With recording, replay and
commercial skipping technology, DVRs altered the traditional television viewing model
by fragmenting the American television-watching audience into DVR and non-DVR
users. According to Nielsen Media Research, DVRs have only just begun to revolutionize
television viewing in the U.S. In a report released August 31, 2005, Nielsen estimated
DVR penetration in U.S. television households at 8%-12% by January 2006; by 2007,
Nielsen predicted this percentage will jump to 12%-24% of households (Mandese, 2005).

Like DVR technology, VOD technology places control in the hands of its users.
VOD offers users a selection of movies and television shows priced per download.
VOD’s appeal lies in the availability of its content at any time, and the variety of its
content for both niche and mass audiences. For example,

the Comcast on Demand platform for March [2005] included instructional TV
shows on poker, two-minute videos of singles looking for love and weekly
highlights of the best soccer goals from around the world […] alongside better-known output from the likes of National Geographic, History Channel, Nickelodeon, MTV, Cartoon Network and news from broadcast networks NBC and CBS (Atkinson, 2005).

While VOD does have its skeptics, VOD’s popularity in the marketplace is much more than a fad. “Forrester Research estimates 28.8 million homes will have VOD by the end of this year [2005], a figure that will rise to 44 million by 2009” (Atkinson, 2005). While NBC President Bob Wright predicts his network will offer previously aired network shows on VOD by the end of 2006 (Atkinson, 2005), the VOD model of consumer choice will continue to alter the popularity of traditional broadcast network television. Thus, the emergence of new television technology – from VCRs and DVD players to DVR devices and VOD – has contributed to media fragmentation by increasing the number of television channels and television watching models available to viewers.

With its global capabilities and integration of text, video and audio, the Internet provides another growing alternative to broadcast television networks. Over the past ten years, the Internet has gradually eroded the time audiences spend watching television. “A 2000 Veronis Suhler Stevenson survey showed that Americans devoted an average of 866 hours to broadcast TV annually and 107 to the Internet, a ratio of 8:1. The projection for 2005 had the TV/Internet ratio at 785 hours to 200, or just under 4:1” (Garfield, 2005). Like advancements in television technology, the Internet allows users to control what time they view content, what form they view content, and what type of content they view – whether news, entertainment, sports, business or any other special interest. However,
Unlike any television technology, the Internet also empowers users to create and publish their own content for the almost 973 million Internet users worldwide (Miniwatts International, 2005). From streaming video to Webisodic short films to blogs and video logs (vlogs), Internet users can view and create original media content unlike any programming available on broadcast television networks.

U.S. media consumers, informed and transformed by the Internet, have also influenced media fragmentation through their expectations of media interactivity. Once a technology element solely reserved for video games and virtual reality, interactivity became an integral element of the mass media when it was adopted as a key element of Web site design. Interactivity can be defined as “the degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronized” (Yuping Liu & Shrum, 2002). By providing opportunities to alter the format of media content according to personal choice, to create original content for a communication medium, and to communicate with a mass communication medium and users of that medium, interactivity adds a more personal, relationship-based approach to media use. In order to understand the motivations of users of interactive mediums, researchers have created the following dimensions of interactivity: “1) playfulness, 2) choice, 3) connectedness, 4) information collection, and 5) reciprocal communication” (Ha & James, 1998). Depending on an individual’s media orientation, personality and mood, interactivity can fulfill a variety of audience communication needs. Through personalization and active engagement of users, interactivity has transformed the mass media from a one-way to
two-way communication vehicle – a change that has shattered the traditional linear model of broadcast television networks.

Demassification, defined as “the ability of the media user to select from a wide menu” (Ruggiero, 2000), is another characteristic of the new non-linear media. By allowing users to choose their own path through the media, demassification demonstrates a societal move away from distributing messages to mass audiences to communicating one-to-one messages. Through “selectivity characteristics,” new media allow users to adapt messages to satisfy individual needs (Ruggiero, 2000). Programming based on individual viewer control and interest is recognized as the foundation of new television media and technology, including cable and satellite systems, as well as DVR and VOD devices. Considering the popularity of media offering user selectivity, it is evident that media users are increasingly favoring new media that function according to user control, and rejecting old media that function according to mass audience appeal.

The introduction of technology-assisted asynchronicity has also transformed television viewing behaviors. Asynchronicity “refers to the concept that messages can be staggered in time” (Ruggiero, 2000) and thus, be viewed, responded to, or altered at the user’s convenience. With the help of Internet message boards and e-mail, media users can communicate with each other, regardless of different schedules or time zones. Also, “once messages are digitized, manipulation of media [text, graphics, video, etc.] becomes infinite, allowing the user much more control than traditional means” (Ruggiero, 2000). Through DVR devices, VOD and VCRs, media users can view televised programs and movies at a later time or as many times as they would like. Alongside interactivity and
demassification, asynchronicity completes the picture of technology-assisted social trends altering user expectations of the modern media experience.

Over the past thirty years, media fragmentation has established itself as a growing, inescapable force impacting the media industry, particularly broadcast television networks. As media fragmentation has developed, it has become not just the source of declining ratings but also the catalyst for the overturn of the traditional media paradigm. In order to function in a world of media fragmentation and new media, traditional media must determine how to satisfy the needs of modern, technology- and media-savvy consumers.

II. Uses and Gratifications Theory: A Working Definition

Mass communication scholars generally define the uses and gratifications approach as a subtradition of behaviorist, media effects research (McQuail, 1994). Early mass communication research was based upon the mass society theory or traditional effects view, which proposes “average people are helpless victims of powerful mass media” (West & Turner, 2004). According to this theory, individuals are unable to resist the powerful influence of the media and accept thoughts, opinions and representations provided by the media. However, this theory has been discredited due to a lack of proof of direct effects and a lack of consistent responses from individuals to the media (West & Turner, 2004). Next, limited effects theories were proposed, suggesting that media influence is “minimized or limited by certain aspects of individual audience members’ personal and social lives” (West & Turner, 2004). It is within the framework of limited effects models of media influence, rather than moderate or powerful media effects
models, that the uses and gratifications approach has developed as an explanation for an individual’s selection and use of media.

The study of audience media gratifications can be traced back to the beginning of empirical mass communication research in the 1940s. Herta Herzog (1940, 1944) began the first stage of development for the uses and gratifications theory with her studies of the role of audience wants and needs in their decisions to engage in different forms of media, including newspapers and radio (West & Turner, 2004). Herzog and other early researchers – including Lazarsfeld and Stanton (1942, 1944, 1949), Suchman (1942), Wolfe and Fiske (1949) and Berelson (1949) – completed uses and gratifications research studies that proposed:

- a list of functions served either by some specific content or by the medium in question: to match one’s wits against others, to get information or advice for daily living, to provide a framework for one’s day, to prepare oneself culturally for the demands of upward mobility or to be reassured about the dignity and usefulness of one’s role (Katz et al., 1974).

Thus, early uses and gratifications research was primarily descriptive and experimental in researching how to better communicate, the unintended consequences of messages, and audience motives and selection patterns for mass media (Ruggiero, 2000). Eventually, it was this focus on audience motives and selection patterns that became the foundation for the modern definition of the uses and gratifications theory (Ruggiero, 2000).

According to Katz et al. (1974), four key failings inherent to these early research studies prevented the creation of a comprehensive overview of media gratifications and
the formulation of theoretical statements. These limitations include: 1. a reliance on open-ended responses from media users to describe media functions, 2. the use of a qualitative approach to categorize gratification statements, an approach that ignored quantitative evidence shown in frequency distributions, 3. a lack of research attempting to find the relationship between users’ psychological and sociological needs and the gratification they receive from the media, and 4. a failure to research the conceptual or quantitative relationships between various media functions and thus, uncover the underlying foundation of media gratifications (Katz et. al, 1974).

Uses and gratifications theory continued to develop during the 1950s and 1960s, when “the emphasis was on identifying and operationalizing the many social and psychological variables that were presumed to be the antecedents of different patterns of consumption and gratifications” (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). Research studies conducted during this period relied on a more functional approach to analyzing media effects than previous studies. In this functional analysis, audience members were viewed as an active part of the communication process (Ruggiero, 2000).

According to McQuail (1984), four factors encouraged the development of mass communication research during the 1960s and thus, helped create a turning point in uses and gratifications research. First, communication research experienced growth as the social sciences gained credibility and access to post-war resources (McQuail, 1984). Second, researchers began to confront “the accumulating evidence about media effect or the lack of it” (McQuail, 1984). Third, as television became integrated into society, it became apparent that this new medium contained “seemingly immense appeal, if not
effect” (McQuail, 1984). Fourth, researchers during the 1960s began to reject more positivist, quantitative research methods in favor of more interpretative and ethnographic approaches (McQuail, 1984). Geiger and Newhagen (1993) highlight the importance of this new interpretative, functional approach to analysis with their decision to credit researcher Joseph Klapper as the catalyst for the “cognitive revolution” in the communication field. Klapper encouraged cross-disciplinary collaboration between uses and gratifications researchers and psychologists from the 1950s forward (Ruggiero, 2000).

Uses and gratifications research experienced a turning point in terms of its direction and key concepts with the publication of Elihu Katz’s *Mass Communication Research and the Study of Culture* in 1959 (McQuail, 1984). Katz, as quoted by McQuail, wrote:

> less attention [should be paid] to what media do to people and more to what people do with media. Such an approach assumes that even the most potent of mass media content cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no “use” for it in the social and psychological context in which he lives. The “uses” approach assumes that people’s values, their interests, their associations, their social roles, are pre-potent and that people selectively “fashion” what they see and hear to these interests (McQuail, 1984).

Following the aforementioned developments in mass communication research and uses and gratifications theory, a revival of empirical uses and gratifications research occurred in the early 1970s in the U.S., Britain, Sweden, Finland, Japan and Israel (Katz
et al., 1974). Researchers in the 1970s created a more systematized approach to studying uses and gratifications, focusing on gratifications sought or obtained from the media (Ruggiero, 2000). This decision to clarify the uses and gratifications theory and its research methods may have been a response to the criticism of Elliot (1974), Swanson (1977), and Lometti, Reeves and Bybee (1977), who remarked that the uses and gratifications theory retained four main flaws (Ruggiero, 2000). These researchers described the theory’s conceptual errors as: “a) a vague conceptual framework, b) a lack of precision in major concepts, c) a confused explanatory apparatus, and d) a failure to consider audiences’ perceptions of media content” (Ruggiero, 2000).

Through the new, systematized framework developed in the 1970s, researchers “examined audience motivations and developed additional typologies of the uses people made of the media to gratify social and psychological needs” (Ruggiero, 2000). These studies focused on:

1) the social and psychological origins of 2) needs, which generate
3) expectations of 4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to
5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities),
resulting in 6) need gratifications and 7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones (Katz et al., 1974).

Methods for determining the uses of media by audience members varied. Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973) analyzed how “real and perceived” attributes of radio, television, newspapers, book and film media can serve consumer’s social and psychological needs. Rosengren (1974) proposed a paradigm for uses and gratifications research that viewed
individuals’ psychological needs, surrounding society, intra- and extra-individual characteristics, and motives for gratification-seeking or problem-solving as explanations of their media consumption. Researchers also clarified the theoretical foundation of the uses and gratifications theory by recognizing that an individual’s uses of the media are dependent on his or her cognitive or affective state at the time of use (Ruggiero, 2000). Blumler (1979) suggested that cognitive motivation encourages individuals to seek out information, while diversion or escape motivation facilitates audience perceptions of realism in entertainment programming (Ruggiero, 2000).

Uses and gratifications research in the 1980s and 1990s continued to clarify the theory’s theoretical framework and defend the theory’s validity. Rubin (1983) described the work of his colleagues as “a systematic attempt to a) conduct modified replications or extensions of studies, b) refine methodology, c) comparatively analyze the findings of separate investigations, and d) treat mass media use as an integrated communication and social phenomenon” (Ruggiero, 2000). Several studies during this period focused on the relationship between audiences and television, including Eastman’s (1979) research analyzing the relationships between television viewing functions and lifestyle attributes, and Ostman and Jeffers’s (1980) research examining the “potential for lifestyle traits and television attitudes to predict viewing motivations” (Ruggiero, 2000). Bantz clarified audience uses and gratifications for television media “by focusing on the similarities and differences in reported uses of television as a medium and reported uses of persons’ favorite type of program” (Bantz, 1982). Other studies sought to clarify the quantitative basis for uses and gratifications research. Rubin (1981) analyzed correlations between
nine television viewing motives and age, level of viewing, television attitudes and program preferences. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985) used empirical methods to compare six alternative gratification/expectancy-value models on their ability to predict television news gratifications.

Additional clarifications to the uses and gratifications theory were made by Windahl (1981) in his explanation of the relationship between media effects and uses and gratifications theories: “Effects researchers discuss the effects of media content on the audience, whereas the uses and gratifications researcher looks for consequences of media use” (Windahl, 1981). Windahl (1981) further clarified how media effects researchers analyze the mass communication process from the communicator’s perspective, while uses and gratifications researchers view the process from the audience’s perspective. By creating the term “conseffects,” Windahl (1981) proposed a synthesis between media effects and uses and gratifications research traditions. With this synthesized approach, Windahl (1981) suggested uses and gratifications researchers observe “conseffects,” which are partly results of content mediated by use and partly results of media use in itself.” Through the term “conseffects,” Windahl defined the difference between consequences – “outcomes of media use per se” – and effects – the impact the media has on audiences (Dobos, 1992). With the proposal of this new approach, Windahl linked earlier uses and gratifications research with more modern research (Ruggiero, 2000).

Thus, since the early 1940s, the uses and gratifications theory has developed to explain the motivating factors determining an individual’s selection of media and satisfaction derived from the use of that media. Researchers’ conclusions on uses and
gratifications can be synthesized into the following five theoretical assumptions:

1. The audience is conceived of as active, i.e., an important part of mass media use is assumed to be goal directed (McQuail, Blumler, and Brown, 1972). […] 2. In the mass communication process much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience member. […] 3. The media compete with other sources of need satisfaction. […] 4. Methodologically speaking, many of the goals of mass media use can be derived from data supplied by individual audience members themselves […] 5. Value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communication should be suspended while audience orientations are explored on their own terms (Katz et al., 1974).

Like most mass communication theories, the uses and gratifications theory is constantly challenged to remain relevant to a media environment with ever-changing technology. From video and computer games to cable television to the VCR to the Internet, researchers have completed studies analyzing the applicability of uses and gratifications theory to new media (Ruggiero, 2000). With the proliferation of media outlets and increased opportunities for viewer control, the uses and gratifications theory has become central to understanding individuals’ selection and use of media. “As new technologies present people with more and more media choices, motivation and satisfaction become even more crucial components of audience analysis” (Ruggiero, 2000).

The uses and gratifications theory’s applicability to old and new media is particularly helpful in analyzing the current situation faced by U.S. broadcast television
networks. Caught in the crossfire between old and new media, the seven major broadcast television networks – Fox, NBC, ABC, CBS, WB, UPN and i (PAX) – are increasingly faced with the fragmentation of the former core audience into a number of smaller, more interest- and value-driven audiences. Since people actively select specific media and media content to generate specific gratifications, the uses and gratifications theory suggests television networks must recognize and respond to an active audience that selects media channels based on need satisfaction. This conclusion leads to the related research questions:

R1: How are television networks responding to media fragmentation?

R2: Does the uses and gratifications theory predict these responses will be effective in re-attracting and retaining audiences?

III. Media Fragmentation and Television: Applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory

*Audience Gratifications from Media Use*

In order to understand individual viewer motivations and satisfaction from media, researchers have created several gratifications models to research viewer choice from different perspectives. Most of these theories focus on two key components of gratification: gratifications sought (reasons or needs that motivate an individual to use a particular media) and gratifications obtained (the satisfaction received by an individual after using a particular media). The two most popular uses and gratifications theories include the gratifications obtained discrepancy model, and the merged uses and gratifications and expectancy value model. The gratifications obtained discrepancy model compares viewer gratifications from different media. Research has proven the
effectiveness of this model as “a strong predictor of program choice” (Dobos, 1992). The merged uses and gratifications and expectancy-value model “states that the products of beliefs (expectations) and evaluations influence the seeking of gratifications, which influence media consumption” (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1984).

At its core, the uses and gratifications approach assumes the media’s audience is an active audience with intentional, goal-directed motives for selecting media channels. “Audience members are seen as active media consumers because their communications choices are based on the gratifications they seek and beliefs that these choices will provide those gratifications” (Rubin & Perse, 1987). The audience activity model created by Rubin and Perse explains the relationship between audience media selection, and user attitudes and expectations of need fulfillment from that particular medium and its content:

We would expect the uses and effects process to flow from gratifications sought, through attitudes, to behavioral intention, selective exposure to media and messages, attention to the content when consuming the messages, and involvement with that content. We would anticipate that involvement feeds back through attitudes to affect future gratification-seeking behavior (Rubin & Perse, 1987).

Thus, Rubin and Perse (1987) determined the audience’s gratifications sought and attitudes toward media use can be used to predict both current and future audience activity.

However, in response to criticism of the assumption that all audiences are active, other researchers propose “a theoretically and empirically realistic approach [of audience
activity] would assume only that different members of the audience will display different types and amounts of activity in different communication settings and at different times in the sequence of communication” (Levy & Windahl, 1984). Data from Levy and Windahl’s (1984) study of audience activity and gratifications also indicates that this variably active audience is “relatively” cognizant of and informed about the media’s capacity to provide specific psychological and social gratifications. Yet, this assertion about the awareness level of the television audience is also based on an assumption. Levy and Windahl’s (1984) model of audience activity and gratifications “assumes a mature audience, that is, an audience whose members – regardless of chronological age – have learned what gratifications to expect from their exposure to various media and who have relatively well-developed patterns of media use.”

While the majority of theories explaining media selection and satisfaction analyze media experiences from the perspective of the audience member (Dobos, 1992), there is no consensus on the best means to categorize these uses and gratifications. In general terms, “studies have shown that audience gratifications can be derived from at least three distinct sources: media content [type of medium or type of programming], exposure to the media per se, and the social context that typifies the situation of exposure to different media” (Katz et al., 1974). The social context affecting an individual’s selection of and response to the media can be viewed as the “the combined product of psychological dispositions, sociological factors, and environmental conditions” (Katz et al., 1974). Since McQuail, Blumler and Brown (1972) and Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973) proposed the most encompassing categorizations of the functions of media use (Katz et
al., 1974), researchers have studied audience uses and gratifications underneath an umbrella of terms. To best understand which media gratifications most directly impact television audiences, Conway and Rubin’s (1991) model of the six psychological predictors of television viewing motivation will be applied to the present discussion of audience uses and gratifications received from broadcast television viewing.

**Audience Gratifications from Television: Conway and Rubin’s (1991) Model**

Conway and Rubin’s approach to television viewing uses and gratifications is based upon humans’ psychological motivation to communicate. “Because psychological factors lead to one’s motives to communicate, understanding the role of psychological variables in media use should allow explanation and prediction of viewing motivation” (Conway & Rubin, 1991). The six “psychological predictors” of viewing motivation used in Conway and Rubin’s study include: pass-time, entertainment, information, escape, relaxation and status enhancement motives. These six motives are a synthesized model of the original nine viewing-motive categories proposed by Rubin (1979, 1981) and Frank and Greenberg (1974) (Conway & Rubin, 1991). Several of the categories identified by earlier research included “seeking information, relaxation, entertainment, arousal, social interaction, companionship, escape, and time consumption” (Conway & Rubin, 1991).

The first television viewing motive studied by Conway and Rubin – pass-time – refers to an individual’s use of television as a way to fill empty spaces of time in the day. Whether an individual has a spare half-hour while cooking dinner or two free hours with no companions to entertain, television can be used as a time filler and companion. In his study comparing viewer-reported uses of the television medium versus viewer-reported
uses of favorite program type, Bantz (1982) labels this psychological motive “Viewing by Default,” a term which describes how “television provides a way of filling the void of having nothing to do at any given point in time.” Television viewers who seek a means to pass the time may use television because it is available, and serves as an avoidance tactic and sleep aid (Bantz, 1982). Conway and Rubin (1991) report that disinhibition, a viewers’ separation from constraints and desire for sensational experiences, is also linked to pass-time motivations. Anxiety is a predictor of an individual’s pass-time motive to use television (Conway & Rubin, 1991).

Television viewers motivated by Conway and Rubin’s entertainment factor watch television programming – including situation comedies, dramas, news, talk, music, reality, sports and movies – for enjoyment. These types of programming offer viewers the opportunity to laugh, cry, get excited and sympathize with television characters and news personalities. Viewers can select television programs based on “the appeal of familiar personalities so that watching TV takes on the characteristics of a ritualized visit with friends that the respondent enjoys being with” (Lee & Lee, 1995). Focus group respondents in a 1988 study of 1,872 American television viewers also reported their enjoyment of the lack of decision-making necessary to experience a pre-planned evening of watching their favorite television programs (Lee & Lee, 1995). While Bantz (1982) categorized voyeurism as a separate psychological motive from entertainment, I classify voyeurism as a subset of entertainment motivation. Both voyeurism and entertainment motivations are rooted in viewers’ desires for pleasure in television viewing. Television voyeurism, which can broadly be defined as an individual’s intrusiveness into the life of
another individual through television programming, encompasses pleasure from perceived personal relationships with program characters, as well as violent and sexual program content. Voyeurism is a newer subject of study for uses and gratifications researchers, and it is presumed to be linked to the “arousal factor” described by Greenberg (1974) and Rubin (1979) (Bantz, 1982).

The information motive describes a viewer’s desire to learn about people, places, trends and phenomena existing both locally and globally. Defined as “surveillance, that is, monitoring the environment through communication,” (Bantz, 1982) the information motive explains humans’ natural curiosity about the lives of others and the world around them. Lee and Lee (1995) describe viewers’ uses of television for information and self-education as the “informational/cognitive benefit” of television. The researchers explain how information-seeking viewers watch television: “to keep the viewer up-to-date on current events, to give the viewer new and interesting information, to acquaint the viewer with people and places he or she might otherwise never encounter, and to provide the viewer with ‘food for thought’” (Lee & Lee, 1995). Information gratifications may be satisfied through a variety of programming, from news to travel and food to interior design to sports. Conway and Rubin (1991) confirmed past research indicating that parasocial interaction – viewers’ pseudo-relationships with television newscasters or characters – and creativity, the use of information to encourage a unique approach to situations or tasks, were the strongest predictors that viewers would use television for information gratification.

Television viewers can also be motivated to use television as an escape from
everyday problems and stressors, as well as an escape from boredom or a monotonous life. These two polarities of escape can be defined as escape to relax and improve one’s mood, and escape to “find suspense, excitement, and emotional arousal” (Lee & Lee, 1995). Conway and Rubin (1991) validate the use of escape as a relaxant in their paraphrased summary of Menninger, Mayman and Pruyser’s (1963) discussion of the importance of stress relief for mental health. “Behaviors such as crying, laughing, and retreating into fantasy act as defense mechanisms against anxiety” (Conway & Rubin, 1991). Lee and Lee (1995) explain viewers’ motivation for using the exciting form of escapism as “a kind of substitute consciousness,” in which viewers receive emotional stimulation from viewing other individuals acting and interacting with other individuals in situations, times and places distinctly different from their own lives. In the more engaging, high stimulation form of escapism, viewers are able to experience fantasies in which they become other people and experience extraordinary situations simply by imagining themselves in the roles of television characters (Lee & Lee, 1995). The most intense form of escapism is described by viewers as “an almost hypnotic, out-of-body state,” which happens “most frequently when viewing daytime and nighttime serials, police/detective programs, and action adventure shows” (Lee & Lee, 1995).

Similar to the escape motivation, Conway and Rubin’s fifth psychological predictor of television viewing motivation is relaxation – a viewer’s desire to unwind tensions and not worry about personal problems. Lee and Lee (1995) explain viewers’ use of television as a means for mood improvement, “as a relaxant to relieve stress, as a way to escape from everyday worries and cares, as a kind of Valium.” Viewers seeking
relaxation gratifications from television are able to temporarily forget stress-causing thoughts and emotions, or release pent-up emotions. In particular, creative individuals use television to release stress and tension created by the pressure to succeed (Conway & Rubin, 1991). Affinity – the attraction or liking felt for television personalities – and parasocial interaction are the strongest predictors for the relaxation motive for television viewing (Conway & Rubin, 1991).

Status enhancement explains humans’ basic desire for human contact, interaction with others and the feeling of belongingness and love from members of society (Conway & Rubin, 1991). Bantz (1982) refers to the desire to improve one’s social status through television as the “Social Resource” factor, which “reflects the use of television content for conversation.” Also known as “social grease […] the role of television as a lubricant to interpersonal communications,” the status enhancement function of television allows viewers to make television-watching a social activity, or at least a topic for future conversation with friends, family and coworkers (Lee & Lee, 1995). Viewers’ prime motivation for watching television may be because they know a certain program will be discussed in social situations. Thus, by watching the program, the viewer will be able to fit into a social community by engaging in a conversation about shared viewing experiences (Lee & Lee, 1995). Television can also provide viewers with status enhancement by creating opportunities for personal growth and improvement. By perceiving a similar reality between their lives and television programming, viewers are able to relate to television characters and situations enough to learn about themselves, think about their beliefs and receive advice on socially acceptable behavior (Lee & Lee,
Viewers who are assertive or experiencing anxiety are more likely to seek status enhancement from television (Conway & Rubin, 1991).

As media fragmentation continues to separate the mass audience, broadcast television executives are increasingly faced with the impact of these six audience gratifications on television viewing. Broadcast networks, driven by advertisers seeking mass audience appeal, must choose which gratifications will satisfy the most viewers. On the other hand, modern cable television systems offer a broad spectrum of programming (sports, news, cooking, children’s cartoons, fashion, etc.) to satisfy audiences with a variety of needs and preferences for media content (Webster, 2005). However, it must be noted that the primary reason for cable and satellite systems to offer content-specific channels is still to offer advertisers programming with narrowly targeted audience demographics (Webster, 2005). Like their broadcast counterparts, the cable and satellite systems do not offer niche programming primarily to fulfill audience gratifications. After all, “The primary goal in programming advertiser-supported television is to maximize the size of an audience targeted by advertisers. The only way to accomplish this goal is to satisfy the needs and wants of that audience” (Eastman et al., 2006).

Despite the relative success of cable’s niche audience strategy, broadcast television networks have continued to program according to mass audience appeal. With the availability of new media, audiences are now actively selecting media that offer more opportunities for viewer control and personalization, and ignoring broadcast network television. “As more control has been placed in the hands of the consumer, the consumer has shown every intention of exercising it. Especially in the coveted 18-34 cohort,
viewers are fleeing TV and going on-line, where nobody need have their content dictated to them” (Garfield, 2005). Jeff Jarvis – president of Advance.net (the online site of media company Advance Publications) and author of the media blog BuzzMachine.com – links this new consumer choice with power (Garfield, 2005). Jarvis defines the invention of the remote control as “the most important invention in the history of media,” for the remote control provided viewer control over media (Garfield, 2005). Jarvis continues to add that, with the introduction of cable, VCRs and then TiVo, viewer control has now extended to the creation of content (Garfield, 2005). The growth of desktop publishing and the increasing ability of users to create and distribute professional-looking media, known as the “total democratization of media,” have forced the media to view consumers not as “demographics” but as “individuals” (Garfield, 2005).

While individual gratifications from the media depend on a variety of factors, from individual psychological and sociological influences to the specific media involved to the individual’s media orientation, the satisfaction of these individual gratifications has become a key element in determining personal media use. Thus, amidst a world of ever-increasing media channels and fragmentation, the future of broadcast television networks rests on the ability of network executives to satisfy a larger number of audience gratifications, while still maintaining the advertising revenue that keeps the industry alive.

IV. Broadcast Television Network Responses to Media Fragmentation

Changes in Distribution, Programming Schedules and Branding

Through declining audience shares and advertising revenue, broadcast television
networks have monitored the fall of the mass audience model and the rise of media fragmentation. In order to reach this increasingly fragmented audience, broadcast television networks have adopted several strategies to better satisfy what media mogul Rupert Murdoch describes as consumers “demanding content delivered when they want it, how they want it, and very much as they want it” (Gibson, 2006). Current broadcast network strategies designed to meet audience uses and gratifications include: distributing content through other media outlets, broadcasting more replays of programming, producing reality television programming and establishing niche broadcast networks to meet the needs of smaller audiences.

Several broadcast television networks have formed media conglomerates to reach audiences with the medium and content they prefer. By encompassing several media channels under one corporate umbrella, media conglomerates provide broadcast television networks with additional channels to reach audiences. Many television networks have focused on the growing arena of web content to increase the distribution of network programming. For instance, NBC Universal purchased the women’s online media network iVillage Inc. in March 2006 to expand its television presence on the Internet. Jeff Zucker, president and CEO of NBC Universal's Television Group, says the acquisition provides the network with a channel to produce original Web content (Shields, 2006a). Zucker also acknowledges NBC’s purchase of iVillage is part of the media company’s strategy to reach consumers who use many different media (Shields, 2006a).

Broadcast television networks are also forming partnerships with web outlets
offering television programs in downloadable format. CBS has partnered with the Google video store – launched in January 2006 – to provide Internet users with downloadable files of four of its prime-time series within 24 hours after their television broadcast (Kopytoff, 2006). Several networks have decided to distribute programs through Apple’s iTunes music store, which offers users the opportunity to download individual television programs onto video iPods. Since the Apple video iPod was launched in the fall of 2005, television networks and the iPod’s estimated 4.5 million users have gained “heightened awareness of the Internet as a new distribution outlet for television for the mass audience” (Chmielewski & James, 2006). While The Walt Disney Company (ABC) was the first company to partner with Apple in October 2005, NBC Universal quickly followed by releasing episodes of its network programs through iTunes (Shields, 2005). Through the iTunes music store, consumers can download commercial-free, premium, prime-time television episodes of Desperate Housewives, Lost and The Office at a $1.99 fee. In addition to using iTunes as a distribution channel for previously released and aired television programs, television networks are also beginning to use iTunes to debut new prime-time programs before their network television premieres. NBC aired the pilot of the program, Conviction, on Apple’s iTunes weeks before the show premiered on network television (Ressner & McDowell, 2006).

Another Internet distribution channel utilized by broadcast television networks is web-streaming of television content. Currently, Fox, NBC, ABC, CBS, WB and UPN all offer clips from television programs on their respective network websites. NBC Sports provided coverage and video clips of the 2006 Winter Olympics through web streaming
on its website, while CBS used web streaming to air 2006 NCAA college basketball
tournament games live and free of charge on its website. Through the ABC News video-
on-demand function, ABC provides Internet users with free video clips of news segments
broadcast on ABC news programs. On September 20, 2006, News Corp., owner of Fox,
launched MyNetwork TV – “a network of integrated new and old media, dictated by
consumer consumption patterns, interests and needs, [that leverages] and comprises
countless digital broadband platforms and outlets” (Mermigas, 2006). Programming for
the new network includes telenovelas, a reality series, a quiz show and a crime-focused
news magazine. All MyNetwork TV programming content “will be transmitted back out
to and even repackaged for other media platforms [including mobile phones, PDAs and
Playstation 3], making My Network TV an important contributor to a much broader
network than is defined in traditional terms” (Mermigas, 2006).

In addition to distributing television programs through Internet outlets, broadcast
television networks are also distributing segments of news and prime-time programming
through mobile phones. CBS provides mobile phone content directly to users through its
“news and Entertainment Tonight video ‘alerts’ for mobile phones,” while Fox offers
content through Fox Mobile Entertainment’s Mobizzo – an online store for video clips of
television programs and the network’s “‘mobsides,’ customized cell-phone mini-
programs” (Ressner & McDowell, 2006). CBS, NBC and ABC provide both video news
clips and pre-packaged programming clips through the Verizon VCast mobile video
package. Fox produced mobsides of its original series 24 as 24: Conspiracy on
Verizon’s VCast. Broadcast television networks are also using Amp’d Mobile and
MobiTV to reach audiences through content formatted for mobile phones. Between a variety of Internet and mobile distribution channels, broadcast television networks are attempting to provide consumers with media content in the most convenient and easily accessible format. In fact, “with high-quality video available on 200 million PCs via broadband, 200 million 3-GB mobile phones, an estimated 4 million iPods and other devices, the Big Four networks (ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox) are scrambling for ways to deliver content over a panoply of platforms” (Ressner & McDowell, 2006).

Broadcast television networks are also reverting to more traditional, less technologically-savvy techniques, such as replaying programming, to revive their declining audiences. Cable and satellite systems regularly utilize re-runs as part of their business model. By broadcasting the same program multiple times, cable and satellite systems satisfy the needs of viewers, advertisers and shareholders. Re-airing programs allows cable and satellite systems to take advantage of a cheaper alternative to original programming, receive larger revenue through cumulative ad play charges, and gratify a niche audience who requires multiple airings to meet its scheduling needs.

Realizing the economic and social benefits of television replays, broadcast television networks are increasingly deciding to use re-runs to reduce expenses and maximize audience coverage. Years ago, broadcast television networks eliminated original programming in favor of re-runs on Saturday nights. “We were losing money on Saturday nights for years [airing original programming],” one anonymous network executive said. ‘Now we are essentially putting on programming [repeats] that cost us nothing, and we are solidly in the black on the night’” (Consoli, 2005). Currently, media
buyers are beginning to worry poor ratings will convince networks to replace Friday night programming – despite the networks’ public promise in October 2005 to retain original Friday programming (Consoli, 2005). Granted, some media analysts also critique this skepticism that expects the networks to cancel original Friday programming. Lyle Schwartz, executive vice president, director of research and marketplace analysis, mediaedge:cia, believes that if broadcast networks relinquished original Friday night programming, they would send more viewers to cable channels (Consoli, 2005). Elizabeth Herbst-Brady, senior vice president, director of broadcast investment at Starcom, explains that “any of the broadcast network 18-49 ratings are still higher than anything on cable on the night.” She adds, “Friday shows are part of packages where ratings points can be boosted by other nights” (Consoli, 2005). Thus, while the short-term danger of expanding broadcast network re-runs to encompass both Friday and Saturday night is limited, broadcast networks are indicating they will use re-runs to save money and ensure programs are available to the largest possible audience.

Another strategy adopted by broadcast television networks in response to media fragmentation is reality television programming. While it is difficult to prove the introduction of reality programming was a response to growing media fragmentation, reality programming meets uses and gratifications that were not satisfied by prior network programming. If voyeurism is considered a component of the uses and gratifications model (as suggested by my inclusion of voyeurism in Conway and Rubin’s entertainment motive), reality television is a response to viewers’ needs for more personally intrusive and sexually gratifying media.
ABC’s *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, which debuted in August 1999, revived the television game show format and ushered in the modern era of reality television.

Since the mid-1999-2000 television schedule, which included the introduction of CBS’ *Survivor* in March, reality television has become a fixture in broadcast network prime-time schedules. Broadcast television networks experience several benefits from reality television programs, including much lower production costs and a greater ability to relate to audiences through “average” Americans – rather than scripted actors. Over the past seven years, the reality television genre has grown to encompass talent and survival shows (*Survivor, American Idol, The Apprentice* and *Dancing with the Stars*), love and relationship shows (*Joe Millionaire, The Bachelor* and *Temptation Island*), family improvement shows (*Nanny 911* and *Wife Swap*), personal makeover shows (*The Swan* and *The Biggest Loser*) and home improvement shows (*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*). As indicated by the list of reality television shows per genre, reality television was quickly embraced – and copied – by each of the networks as a strategy to increase viewer ratings. Industry analysts have noted a significant rise in the amount of reality programming in the past few years. “For the week of Dec. 5, 2004, nonscripted shows comprised 19.5 percent of the entire prime-time schedule, up 7 percent from the same period in ’03, according to Magna's analysis of Nielsen” (Frutkin, 2005a). Jeff Zucker, president and CEO of NBC Universal's Television Group, believes this strategy of introducing unscripted programs has been effective. Zucker’s view of reality programming as a solution for media fragmentation is summarized: “the midseason introductions of unscripted programs such as the Peacock hit ‘The Apprentice’ and Fox
Broadcasting Co.’s ‘American Idol 3’ have stopped the bleeding and stemmed the loss of broadcast audience share” (Linnett, 2004). Nielsen ratings for television shows the week of April 5, 2004, prove Zucker’s point, for reality programs *The Apprentice* (NBC), *American Idol* (Fox, Tuesday and Wednesday night episodes) and *Survivor: All-Stars* (CBS) comprised four out of the top five rated television shows (Linnett, 2004).

Some broadcast television networks have employed brand positioning to reestablish viewers’ loyalty and preference for network programming. Branding – specifically, the decision to target and cater to the needs of a niche market – has been used by four out of the seven major broadcast networks. Following the success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson’s Creek*, the WB positioned its network for a younger demographic market of tweens and teens. While the network is described as “targeting viewers 12-34” (Consoli, 2004a), the WB particularly targets 12-20 year-olds with programs in high school settings (*One Tree Hill* and *Smallville*) and college settings (*Gilmore Girls*). UPN has not only branded itself as a young, female-friendly network, but it has also experimented with more racially diverse television programming – including more programs starring and targeting African Americans. The decision to target young female viewers has helped UPN develop into “one of television's most popular networks with women 18-34” (CBS Broadcasting, 2006). In May 2002, Fox expressed its dissatisfaction with its solid audience of 18-34 year olds by deciding to expand its reach from male teens to include more female teens and the older segment of the 18-49 demographic (Consoli, 2002). Since the late twentieth century, Fox’s programming has positioned the network as a less conservative counterpart to the more traditional NBC,
ABC and CBS networks. While the other three members of the Big Four focus more on conventional, quality programming for the mass audience, Fox embraces and caters to its youthful, adventure-seeking audience with shows like *Fear Factor* and *The OC*. On September 25, 2005, PAX TV officially rebranded its network as *i*. The network’s Web site describes the new brand as a better match with its new network programming strategy of “offering blocks of our network time to independent programmers and producers” seeking nationwide distribution (Ion Media Networks). Through this programming strategy, *i* has positioned itself as a network for privately-funded programming, family-oriented programming and syndicated programming.

On the other hand, NBC, ABC and CBS have largely ignored branding and decided to maintain the traditional mass audience model – a decision that has resulted in the loss of network viewers to more niche-driven network and cable competitors. These three networks are experiencing the economic impact of audiences fleeing to new channels through reduced advertising revenue. For “the familiar strategy of assembling a large, common denominator audience to sell to advertisers is no longer sure-fire, as upstart ‘weblets’ like UPN and WB offer programs tailored to attractive market segments like young adults, and cable programmers unrestrained by skittish advertisers can steal audiences with ‘edgy’ programs far sexier and riskier than networks allow” (Gross, 2001).

*Potential Effectiveness of Responses According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory*

Both media industry analysts and broadcast network executives agree the networks can never completely halt the progress of media fragmentation and regain their...
former popularity with the mass American television audience. Current trends toward personalization and user-specific content indicate the media landscape will continue to grow and separate into smaller, more niche channels. The inevitability of media fragmentation is described by ABC President Robert Iger. “We used to think the possibility existed that the erosion [of the network viewing audience] was going to stop. We were silly. It’s never going to stop. As you give consumers greater and greater choices, they are going to make more choices” (Garfield, 2005). However, while a return to the idyllic dominance of broadcast television networks is an improbable occurrence, the implementation of strategic programming and formatting policies could allow broadcast television networks to more effectively compete in the struggle for the mass American audience. According to the uses and gratifications theory and Conway and Rubin’s (1991) six psychological predictors of television viewing, the potential effectiveness of these network policies can be measured by the extent to which network programming satisfies an active audience’s pass-time, entertainment, information, escape, relaxation and status enhancement motives.

The broadcasting of television programs through alternative channels – including web and mobile phone platforms – is one formatting policy used by broadcast television networks to combat media fragmentation. Through the integration of web outlets into already established media conglomerates, partnerships with web outlets offering downloadable content, interactive network websites, web streaming and mobile phone content, broadcast networks are making a strategic decision to expand beyond creating and distributing programs solely for television. This decision to broaden the network
television model to incorporate alternative media channels is based on the concept that broadcast networks can increase viewership by providing users with the media content and the media format they prefer – the foundation of the uses and gratifications theory. Through a variety of media channels, broadcast television networks can increase the likelihood that users’ pass-time, entertainment, information, escape and relaxation motives will be satisfied through their programming. By allowing users to access broadcast television network programs at any time and in any place, broadcast networks help media users pass time on the subway, in the airport and in the home. Mike McGuire, a media analyst with Gartner Inc., describes the phenomenon as “increasingly people want content on their own terms, and on multiple devices,’ meaning their laptop, desktop, mobile phone, handheld device or media player” (Noguchi, 2006). Joseph LaRocca, an executive at the National Retail Federation, confirms McGuire’s assessment of the convenience of new media that caters to individual lifestyles by providing programming when and where the user wants it. “It gives me the ability to put TV on my time frame, and not have it dictate my schedule,” LaRocca said (Noguchi, 2006). In this sense, by fulfilling users’ pass-time motives with portable content, broadcast networks are able to receive more opportunities to fulfill users’ entertainment, information, escape and relaxation motives. Out of the four previously mentioned network strategies to combat media fragmentation, alternative channels are the most effective strategy to satisfy pass-time motives.

Alternative channels only indirectly fulfill Conway and Rubin’s status enhancement motive for television viewing. By creating alternative channels and thus,
times for program viewing, broadcast television networks may increase the likelihood that users will be able to improve their social status by discussing programming. Yet, the more significant status enhancement users receive from interacting with alternative channels is the prestige users derive from using technology to access these channels. Owners of portable DVD players, high-tech mobile phones and Apple video iPods receive status from their ownership of these products and use of these products in public.

Despite its advantages, the effectiveness of alternative channels is mediated by each user’s interest and ability to access alternative channels. Some television viewers do not have access to web and mobile phone content, while others do not enjoy viewing programs on the smaller computer, mobile, or MP3 player screen with non-skippable commercials. In fact, an AP-AOL Video poll of 3,003 adults in July and August 2006 indicated that “more than half of Internet users have watched or downloaded video,” but “only one in five online video viewers have watched or downloaded a full-length movie or television show” (Jesdanun, 2006). Additionally, an online survey of 2,101 participants commissioned by the cable television trade organization CAB explains, “more than 60 percent [of respondents] said they preferred watching video on TV rather than on a computer or an iPod-like device” (McClellan, 2006). “Most said non-TV devices were best suited for watching short clips, not long-form entertainment” (McClellan, 2006).

In other words, alternative channels effectively provide users with control over media format by separating “television” from the television set in the living room. Regardless of how effective this strategy may be at increasing cumulative network
audiences, this strategy is ineffective in increasing viewership for broadcast television programs aired on television. For while broadcast networks may attract some viewers to television through viewer exposure to content on alternative channels, the number of cross-over viewers to television is assumed to be limited.

Media analysts lack a consensus on the number and purpose of replays on broadcast television networks. Some media analysts believe broadcast television networks have increased their use of program replays in an attempt to slow the progress of media fragmentation. Other media analysts insist broadcast television networks have reduced their use of program replays to increase viewership. As increases and decreases in the number of replayed programs may satisfy different uses and gratifications, each of these views must be individually analyzed to determine the effectiveness of replays in combating media fragmentation.

First, an increase in the number of replays ensures the largest possible number of viewers will be able to see a particular program. Multiple airings of a program ensure viewers with different lifestyles and schedules can access the same programming when it is most convenient for them to watch television. Broadcast television networks also benefit from the reduced amount of original programming they have to pay to produce, and the reduced amount of time they lose to poorly-performing programs. In addition, some advertisers benefit from advertising replays during the program re-run.

However, an increase in replayed programming can also be a disadvantage to viewers. Through re-plays, networks decrease the number of opportunities and time periods they have to fulfill users’ pass-time, entertainment, information, escape,
relaxation and status enhancement motives with original programming. Replays do not provide the same level of excitement, humor or attention-grabbing suspense as original programs. Since the program has previously aired, viewers of the re-run will receive minimal status enhancement or new information. However, re-runs may still be valuable in helping viewers pass time and relax; for the repeated content of programs provides a certain level of comfort in its predictability.

Further distinctions in the effectiveness of increased replays should also distinguish between the satisfaction viewers derive from viewing re-runs of programs currently on-air and programs categorized as “classic television” re-runs. Television stations in more than a dozen Southern markets are enjoying success with syndicated reruns of 1960s-era classics, including *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Good Times* (Romano, 2006). In comparison to more contemporary reruns, classic programming re-runs can use less recently aired content to satisfy viewers’ pass-time, entertainment, escape and relaxation motives. Classic re-runs achieve success with repeat airings by manipulating viewers’ nostalgia and comfort level with previously viewed programs. Classic re-runs can also attract new audiences who may not have seen the program during its original broadcast seasons.

Successful re-runs of currently on-air programs more often occur with scripted programs – versus unscripted reality programs – and “semi-serialized dramas, such as *ER*, *The West Wing* and *24*, which require viewers to keep pace with continuing storylines” (Lowry, 2004). Since these programs more actively engage viewers and attract more consistent, loyal viewers, these re-runs are more likely to satisfy viewers’
needs for pass-time, entertainment, escape and relaxation than other program re-runs. For “despite audience erosion, there’s also ample evidence that people possess a near-insatiable appetite for scripted programs they really like” (Lowry, 2004).

Despite the noted viewer benefits of replays, both classic and currently on-air program re-runs provide minimal status enhancement. Classic television re-runs are rarely a topic of social conversation. Re-runs of currently on-air programs can provide status enhancement primarily when a dedicated viewer is able to view enough re-runs to become integrated into a program’s audience during its regular season.

Thus, an increase in programming replays per se does not necessarily diminish a broadcast television network’s effectiveness in satisfying audience uses and gratifications. The success of using increased program re-runs is more dependent on when, why and how the network airs the repeats (Consoli, 2006). Therefore, “to say re-runs are out, as many have, misses the point. Yes, the old re-run formula is changing, but, of necessity, there will always be plenty on – or available for purchase – offering that comfortable feeling of déjà vu all over again” (Lowry, 2004).

In contrast, some media analysts argue that broadcast television networks have reduced the amount of re-runs to increase viewership. Since the premiere of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire in August 1999, broadcast networks have shifted to more year-round original programming to combat the effects of original cable programming (Benson, 2005). This shift in strategy has become particularly pronounced during the summer months, when broadcast networks that used to rely upon programming re-runs have begun to broadcast several original programs per channel (Benson, 2005). For instance,
on June 7, 2005, ABC’s original program *Dancing with the Stars* attracted 15.1 million viewers. This high audience share “earned ABC its best summer rating in six years in adults 18 to 49 years old” (Becker & Romano, 2005). Recognizing that most replayed programs do not receive as high audience share ratings, broadcast networks are also using more creative programming strategies during non-sweeps months (Consoli, 2004b). During the 2004-2005 programming season, NBC decided “to air its veteran Wednesday drama *The West Wing* in a lengthy first-run arc, replace it with first-run episodes of new drama *Revelations*, and then run the remaining fresh episodes of *West Wing*” to provide more year-round original programming (Consoli, 2004b).

According to the uses and gratifications theory, original programming is more likely to satisfy consumers’ information, status enhancement, entertainment and escape motives than replayed programming. Through its first-run, recently produced content, original programming can provide more up-to-date information and status enhancement. Entertainment and escape motives require excitement and emotional engagement, both of which are better satisfied in the new adventures and unpredictability of original programming. Since the pass-time motive focuses more on the time of a program than its content, original programming and replayed programming may be able to equally satisfy this viewing motivation. Gratification of the pass-time motive is also dependent upon the time at which the program airs – whether a time of day with overall high-viewership or low-viewership. Likewise, the degree to which viewers are able to satisfy the relaxation motive with original programming depends on their preference for relaxing with new programs or re-run programs.
The introduction and increasing use of reality programming is another technique used by broadcast television networks to slow the progress of media fragmentation. Laura Caraccioli-Davis, senior vice president, director of Starcom Entertainment, believes “rawness” or the unscripted, not formula-based content of reality television, was what initially attracted advertisers – and by extension, viewers – to reality programming (Frutkin, 2005b). When it first emerged as a media trend, reality programming distinguished itself from its scripted counterparts by depicting real people interacting in real-time situations.

Viewers’ ability to relate to program characters and situations is what drives the achievement of their status enhancement, information and relaxation motives. In fact, “status is the main motivational force that drives interest in reality television” (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). “The more status-oriented people are, the more likely they are to view reality television and report pleasure and enjoyment” (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). By comparing themselves to the ordinary characters depicted in reality programming, viewers can perceive themselves as higher status than the characters and envision themselves as celebrities on television (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Due to its societal popularity, viewers of reality television can also experience status enhancement through peer discussions of reality programming (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Similarly, reality television satisfies viewers’ information motive by gratifying viewers’ innate curiosity to learn about other people, places and experiences. Reality television’s capacity to encourage viewers to both relate to and distance themselves from the characters in reality programming allows viewers to experience the relaxation motive. Viewers can
sympathize with the similar problems of characters, without experiencing the conflict felt by the characters. By viewing characters’ problems, viewers can temporarily forget their own stressors and release pent-up emotions.

The paradoxical viewer connection to and detachment from reality television characters also fulfills viewers’ entertainment and escape motives. Through the establishment of mediated relationships with characters, viewers can vicariously experience the lives of characters and emotionally relate to characters. Reality programming also entertains viewers by appealing to their voyeuristic tendencies. While networks’ capacity to intrude into the privacy and sexual behavior of program characters is limited by indecency standards, reality programming is still able to satisfy viewers’ desire to intrude into the private lives of strangers-cum-celebrities. Viewers’ escape motive is stimulated by viewing the challenges and conflicts of other individuals, especially in extraordinary adventure programming, such as Survivor, or heartwarming programming, such as Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. Escape motives are best satisfied in programming that expands beyond a viewer’s current perspective to include unique experiences not felt by the ordinary viewer. While viewers’ entertainment and escape motives were initially gratified through solely competition-based reality programming, more recently developed reality programs appeal to viewers’ enjoyment of watching self-improvement that transforms vulnerable characters into self-assured, happy people (Becker, 2005).

Through its unique perspective and content, reality programming may have initially satisfied viewers’ pass-time motive better than other television programming.
However, as the reality programming genre continues to develop, its initial unpredictability and rawness have been dulled by overexposure, the integration of branded entertainment, and increased production crew involvement that reduces realism and follows a formula (Frutkin, 2005b). In fact, reality television viewership in 2005 rapidly declined in season-to-date comparisons – *Survivor* viewership fell by 9.3%, *Amazing Race* viewership dropped 15.6% and *The Apprentice* viewership decreased by 34.6% (Granatstein, 2005).

Despite reduced viewership, media analysts are optimistic about the long-term success of the reality programming genre. Some analysts cite the relative newness of the genre, explaining reality programming will evolve to more closely meet content needs and match the proper proportion to scripted programming (Frutkin, 2005a). Kris Magel, senior vice president, account director at Zenith Optimedia, believes reality programming is still a viable option if networks develop innovative ideas to re-engage viewers (Frutkin, 2005b). Sam Armando, director of television research for Starcom Worldwide, emphasizes Magel’s point in describing how the increase in reality program options has made viewers more selective. “It’s not the genre of the show, it’s the quality that brings them back,” Armando said (Finkle, 2004).

Only three of the seven major broadcast television networks in the U.S. have created viewer- and content-specific brand identities – WB, UPN and i. Of the remaining four networks – the Big Four – Fox is the only network that has somewhat directly identified itself as a network created for a specific audience. NBC, ABC and CBS have relied upon their long-standing logos and reputations for programming to attract viewers.
While the creation of a brand identity alone cannot better satisfy viewers’ uses and gratifications, the combination of a clear brand identity and audience-focused programming can help viewers distinguish which media will best satisfy their needs. Thus, the success of network brands in satisfying viewers’ pass-time, entertainment, escape, information, status enhancement and relaxation motives is dependent on the type of content used to shape the network’s brand. If the content behind the brand does not appeal to viewers, the brand strategy will not fulfill viewers’ uses and gratifications. On the other hand, a brand strategy that demonstrates a network’s focus on viewer needs and interests can help retain and increase the network’s audience. Networks that use brands to make viewers feel understood and cool will create positive perceptions with viewers and thus, increase the likelihood that viewers will watch and become loyal to that network.

However, the effectiveness of branding broadcast television networks has been unproven at best and unsuccessful at worst. Network branding first developed in response to “the success of branding ads for cable networks like the sports maven ESPN, Lifetime (‘Television for women’) and TNT (‘We know drama’)” (Elliott, 2006). The relative success of branding initiatives with i have yet to be proven since its launch in September 2005. Most recently, the strongest example of network branding, the WB, and another branded network, UPN, determined they could not achieve sufficient viewership with their branded differentiation. The two networks merged to form the CW network, a consolidation of each network’s most successful programming.

Prior to its launch September 20, 2006, the CW – which is jointly owned by CBS and Warner Brothers – initiated a branding campaign to identify itself to 18-34 year-old
viewers. The CW used the tagline, “Free to be,” to appeal to its audience’s preference for choice and individuality (Elliott, 2006). Rick Haskins, executive vice president for marketing and brand strategy at CW, describes the positioning of the CW to meet viewer needs. “‘Free to be’ is about how we can fit into their world,” not “forcing our brand on somebody,” Haskins explained (Elliott, 2006). By utilizing a multi-platform approach that incorporates the Internet, iPods and other new media, CW demonstrates its desire to “engage them [viewers] where they live – in the digital world” (Elber, 2006). In comparison to its network counterparts who are struggling to incorporate new media into their broadcast model, CW is integrating alternative channels into the foundation of its broadcast model (Elber, 2006). Jonah Disend, chief executive at Redscout, a brand strategy company in New York, believes CW’s branding and multi-platform distribution strategy are central to attracting viewers who view television shows in a variety of outlets (Elliott, 2006).

Thus, CW is using both program content and brand image to appeal to viewers seeking “the next generation of television networks” (Elber, 2006). The CW’s focus on viewers’ uses and gratifications is summarized by CW Entertainment President Dawn Ostroff. “The words we use to describe CW, besides the young demographic, are innovation, participation, connection and community,” Ostroff said. Future ratings will determine the relative effectiveness of CW’s new approach to branding network content and format to meet viewer needs. The relative success of CW will also demonstrate the effectiveness of broadcast television network branding initiatives in attracting and retaining viewers.
V. Discussion

Broadcast television networks are responding to media fragmentation by expanding program distribution to more media channels, broadcasting more program replays, developing reality programming and creating niche broadcast networks. Through changes to the network business model of programming and distribution, broadcast television networks are attempting to combat the effects of increased media options for user selectivity and individual viewer control.

However, according to the uses and gratifications theory, these network strategies have only limited effectiveness in re-attracting and retaining audiences. For while alternative channels provide more opportunities to view programming, these channels alter the format – not the content – of programming. Viewers’ uses and gratifications from alternative channels are also mediated by each user’s interest and ability to access these alternative channels.

It is difficult to determine the effectiveness of program replays, for this effectiveness is dependent on program type and individual viewer preferences. Some viewers appreciate the flexibility provided by program replays, while other viewers prefer only original programming. Additionally, certain program types are more successful in re-run format than other programs.

While reality programming effectively meets viewers’ needs for voyeurism and status, analysts are divided on the long-term success of the reality programming model. Increased ubiquity and producer control have reduced reality programs’ rawness and unpredictability – two key factors for attracting viewers. However, some analysts are
optimistic that the reality program genre is still developing and has time to adapt to viewer feedback.

Branding strategies are more effective in aiding viewers in the media selection process than fulfilling viewer gratifications for program content. The recently launched CW network will serve as the first industry test of whether a combined brand identity, content and format structure can retain audiences. Prior attempts at network branding indicate this strategy will not be successful.

**Recommended Changes to Network Strategies**

According to the uses and gratification theory, current broadcast television network strategies to combat media fragmentation have limited effectiveness in re-attracting and retaining audiences. Katz et. al (1974) describe the changes that need to take place in the network television business model as a positive opportunity to meet viewers’ needs: “Instead of depicting the media as severely circumscribed by audience expectations, the uses and gratifications approach highlights the audience as a source of challenge to producers to cater more richly to the multiplicity of requirements and roles that it has disclosed.” To successfully meet the challenge of satisfying viewers’ gratifications, broadcast networks need to shift the network business model from focusing predominantly on advertisers to focusing more on viewers, increase opportunities for interactivity with programs and other program viewers, and expand the quality and availability of alternative platform content.

First, broadcast networks must begin to center programming and format decisions more closely around user control, not advertising revenue. The uses and gratifications
theory explains how users select and use media that serve personal needs. In television, this theory dictates programs and formats that place viewer needs first – above commercial advertising interests. By satisfying television viewers who seek control over the content and time of programming, networks will in turn satisfy advertiser needs for larger audiences. Thus, a shift in the network business model that accommodates the interdependence of viewer and advertiser satisfaction will lead to increased viewership and profitability. However, this shift in focus will require the establishment of new measurement systems to determine viewership. Rishad Tobaccowala, president of Internet media shop Starcom IP, explains how current measurements of advertising value quantify numbers of viewers but do not calculate viewers’ enjoyment of programming (Garfield, 2005). “The industry's key currency is basically reach, frequency, exposure and cost per thousand,” Tobaccowala said. “And where the currency ought to be is about outcomes, engagement and effectiveness” (Garfield, 2005).

By developing more viewer-centric business models, broadcast networks can begin to more fully interact and engage with audiences. Networks are now beginning to engage audiences through blogs, podcasting and downloadable videos. However, the development of these channels for interactivity has been largely in response to viewer-created blogs and video content. Viewers first developed personal fan sites, blogs and downloadable video on non-network websites to discuss shows with peers. Realizing the value of viewer forums for creating word-of-mouth and establishing viewer loyalty, networks then began to develop corporate-controlled forums for viewers to interact with program writers and actors, as well as other viewers. Creators and writers for ABC’s Lost
and *Grey’s Anatomy* answer fan questions and complaints, and offer sneak peaks into future episodes on blogs on ABC’s website (Peterson, 2006). NBC’s *The Office* uses MySpace.com blogs as a forum for program actors to communicate with fans (Peterson, 2006). Shelley McCrory, senior vice president for comedy series at the NBC Universal Television studio, says NBC’s blogs allow viewers to feel a sense of ownership and community with a program, which by extension, increases their loyalty (Peterson, 2006).

In engaging audiences, networks must walk the careful line between establishing relationships with audiences and using interactive channels for solely commercial purposes. Jon Kamen, chairman and CEO of @Radical Media, describes the role of persuasion and engagement in creating program content. “Radically connecting means engaging, not bombarding, not tricking them into watching something,” Kamen said. “If you're going to produce content, produce something that engages [the audience] to stay with it,” (Quengua, 2006). Kamen insists viewer entertainment is a more accurate standard than viewership ratings to measure programming success (Quengua, 2006). Interactive media that engage and entertain the audience are also not without risks. Network-sponsored blogs risk losing the “grassroots spirit that defines the blogosphere” by excessive promotion of online offerings (Malone, 2006). Strict network control over blog content effectively reduces viewer control of the medium and limits two-way interaction. While viewers seek engagement with programs and other program viewers, viewers will shun networks that are overtly commercial in courting viewers or networks that ignore viewer feedback. With easy access to network blogs and websites, viewers can easily express their opinions – both positive and negative. Viewer blogs may request
changes in a program’s content or broadcast time that cannot be altered by networks. Extremely loyal fans expect to be involved in the program’s creation and may become upset with the network if their plot suggestions go unheeded by writers. “Whether it is *Lost* fanatics lobbying for the on-screen death of the gun-toting Ana Lucia, *Grey’s Anatomy* supporters calling for the head of the bumbling George O’Malley, or the *Veronica Mars* faithful raging against the divisive Duncan Kane, the most dedicated fans are also the most demanding” (Peterson, 2006). Thus, network encouragement of viewer interactivity satisfies viewers’ needs for engagement but also presents challenges in maintaining viewer satisfaction.

In addition to using alternative channels for engagement, broadcast television networks are also using these platforms for content distribution. Similar to the concept of viewer interactivity, the multi-platform television model is still in its infancy. Networks developing and offering content in multiple platforms are still considered industry innovators, rather than average industry contributors. As such, networks must improve the quality of program content and access to content in this multi-platform environment to satisfy viewers’ uses and gratifications. Despite industry-wide consensus on the impact of asyncronicity in shifting viewing habits, networks continue to carefully restrict the alternate platforms carrying network programs. Each network has created separate partnerships with Internet and mobile platforms, so viewers cannot reach all network programming in one location. Instead, viewers seeking Internet downloads of programs must search for programs through a variety of media, such as iTunes, the network’s website and Google video. In distributing content on alternate platforms, networks are
also just beginning to repackage content for each specific medium. While some networks and programs are offered in medium-friendly format through webisodes or mobisodes, much alternate platform content is simply redistributed in its original form – regardless of the needs of the alternate medium. To satisfy viewers’ needs in alternate channels, networks must repackage content in a format that makes sense for that individual medium. For instance, mobile phone content needs closer camera angles to suit the smaller screen and shorter program lengths to match viewers’ attention spans.

Regardless of these recommended changes, to describe broadcast network television as a failing business model without hope for a revival is an unnecessarily gloomy prediction. While broadcast network audiences have steadily declined in the last decade, these networks still offer the broadest reach and largest audiences of any media channel (Atkinson, 2006b). Networks’ decision to expand into a multi-platform content model has been a positive change in the industry. “The network has become the first of multiple windows and screens that get exploited,” said Larry Gerbrandt, a senior analyst for Nielsen Media Research (Ressner & McDowell, 2006). “They’re now beginning to view themselves as more than broadcasters” (Ressner & McDowell, 2006). Early reviews of the 2006-2007 season have also been positive from both viewers and analysts (Atkinson, 2006b). Network viewership for the first week of the 2006-2007 season rose from 40.7 million viewers in 2005 to 42.3 million viewers in 2006, perhaps in response to network changes (Atkinson, 2006b). Networks have also moved to improve the content and accessibility of programming in 2006, for “all the networks have hired high-priced talent, invested in costlier productions and are getting savvier about promoting their
wares on every outlet from online to VOD” (Atkinson, 2006b). To retain viewer and analyst enthusiasm, networks must continue to evolve. By incorporating an increased viewer focus, improving engagement and repackaging content for a multi-platform media environment, broadcast television networks can re-attract and retain viewers despite media fragmentation.

**Recommended Changes to the Uses and Gratifications Theory**

In order to understand how broadcast television networks should adapt content and format strategies to meet viewers’ needs, researchers must develop a twenty-first century definition of the uses and gratifications model that accounts for all of the needs of the modern viewer. While the uses and gratifications theory has evolved with changes in technology, its current definition does not address engagement or viewer control over content and format. In addition to lacking motives for control, asynchronicity and personalization, the operationalization of the uses and gratifications theory in Conway and Rubin’s (1991) model of the six psychological predictors of television viewing also does not provide clear distinctions between its six predictors.

While Windahl (1981) included “content mediated by use” as a component of viewer gratifications, the uses and gratifications theory has never directly addressed viewer needs for engagement. Media interactivity has existed for centuries in the form of print letters to the editor. However, within the past fifteen years, the role of interactivity in media uses and gratifications has shifted from a secondary to a primary source of gratifications. For instance, Dave Howe, executive vice president/general manager, Sci Fi Channel, explains the significant value of podcasting in enhancing viewer loyalty to
television shows: “The more immersive the experience, the more people will bond with your content” (Shields, 2006b). Thus, interactivity has become a central component impacting viewer selection and loyalty to particular media.

Between widespread usage of the Internet and easily accessible, user-created mass media content, control has become an increasingly important factor that determines an individual’s selection and use of the media. Modern television viewers seek control over the channel they watch, the type of programming available on the channel and the format of the channel. With the broad reach of cable and satellite systems, viewers now experience increased control over the channel they watch on television. Through television shows with call-in voting, such as Fox’s American Idol, viewers can control the content of programming. Viewer control over media format occurs through both the impact of viewership ratings on media channels and viewer expectations for asynchrony. Technology and viewer expectations for a multi-platform media environment have solidified the importance of media asynchrony for multi-tasking, time-starved viewers. Asynchrony allows users to access the media according to their own schedules, thus shaping viewers’ enjoyment of the media.

Through engagement and control motives for viewing, viewers’ uses and gratifications from television have been expanded to include personalization. As dictated by media fragmentation, viewers seek media that respond to their specific, individual needs, not the needs of the mass audience. Broadcast television networks have begun to demonstrate personalization in media through their expansion into a multi-platform business model and development of online viewer forums. Writer and former venture
capitalist Om Malik describes the role of personalization in television by comparing television preferences to other personal consumer choices: “I mean, we can pick and choose what foods we eat, what car we drive, what clothes we wear and what colognes we use. And some guy sitting in New York decides how I should watch?” (Garfield, 2005).

Thus, Conway and Rubin’s (1991) model of the six psychological predictors of television viewing motivation – pass-time, entertainment, information, escape, relaxation and status enhancement motives – should be expanded to incorporate viewer motives for control, asynchroneity and personalization. Through their experiences with new media, viewers have begun to view these three motives as central to any media experience, including television viewing. These additional components also provide support for the model’s assumption of an active audience that shapes media behavior according to its needs.

Further improvements to Conway and Rubin’s (1991) model should include more precise definitions of each motive. While the model does indirectly describe engagement in television viewing, this motive is diluted in its implied inclusion in the entertainment and escape motives. A clearer explanation of viewers’ engagement motive, as distinct from the entertainment and escape motives, would more directly tie the television viewing predictor model to the uses and gratifications theory. Additional clarifications to the definitions of each of the six motives would allow the inclusion of new motives, such as voyeurism, in the predictor model. Through the emergence and continued popularity of reality television, the voyeurism motive has developed into another component of viewer
selection and use of the media.

Limitations

While this study views broadcast television networks through the lens of the uses and gratifications theory and media fragmentation, its effectiveness in analysis is limited by its inability to predict future changes in the industry and provide actionable solutions to declining network viewership. First, the constant evolution and development of technology prevents a complete prediction of appropriate broadcast network strategies to meet viewers’ uses and gratifications in the future. Not only does technology shape the type and appropriateness of network responses to media fragmentation, it also precludes complete predictions of both the future of the broadcast network business model and the media fragmentation phenomenon.

Future research should expand beyond the current synthesis of research to incorporate a quantitative analysis of viewership trends, channel viewing habits and the effectiveness of broadcast network strategies per network. For in its broad perspective of analyzing broadcast television networks within the context of the media industry, the study does not analyze broadcast networks on a per network basis – such as focusing solely on one member of the Big Four – or a genre-specific basis, such as analyzing only news programming or prime-time programming.

By analyzing broadcast television network responses to media fragmentation and the effectiveness of these responses according to the uses and gratifications theory, this study places a greater focus on discussing networks’ problems than presenting potential solutions to networks’ declining viewership. This reduced focus on solutions prevents the
application of network viewership strategies to other media facing fragmentation. While an attempt was made to describe the larger media and industry context within which broadcast networks function, a more complete description of the use and effectiveness of network strategies would place these strategies within the programming and financial constraints of broadcast television networks.

The findings of this study – the proposed additions to the uses and gratifications theory and Conway and Rubin’s (1991) model of the predictors of television viewing – provide a foundation for the development of a modern definition of the uses and gratifications theory and television viewing motives. The study’s results indicate broadcast television networks are developing strategies in response to media fragmentation that meet the criteria of the uses and gratifications theory. Measurement of the effectiveness of networks’ current strategies and the study’s proposed strategies will require a more complete operationalization of the uses and gratifications theory, as well as the test of time.
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