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## The Cable Network in an Era of Digital Media: Bravo and the Constraints of Consumer Citizenship

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**THE CABLE NETWORK IN AN ERA OF DIGITAL MEDIA: BRAVO AND THE  
CONSTRAINTS OF CONSUMER CITIZENSHIP**

A Dissertation Presented

by

ALISON D. BRZENCHEK

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2014

Department of Communication

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Communication

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate my dissertation to Bentley and Blackjack Brzenchek. Bentley, a feisty, intelligent, and independent-minded miniature schnauzer died on March 17, 2012. Blackjack, a loyal and athletic lab mix with a passion for playing fetch died on March 23, 2012. They were both loving dogs that made me a better human being.

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Writing a dissertation is a long arduous process, and I am grateful I had the unwavering support and guidance of Mari Castañeda. Dr. Castañeda is a serious scholar and a generous mentor. Her rigorous approach to research pushed me to set high standards, while Dr. Castañeda's open and caring mentorship gave me the strength to move forward when faced with setbacks and frustrations. From feedback on countless drafts of chapters, meetings on campus to talk through ideas, and phone calls to discuss my progress after I took an out-of-state position as a lecturer, Dr. Castañeda's support made the completion of this project possible. I am grateful for the indelible mark she has left on my dissertation, my development as a scholarly writer, and my commitment to feminist political economic analysis.

The support of my committee – Emily West, Shawn Shimpach, Julie Graham (1945-2010), and Nancy Folbre – has also been of immense value. My understanding of consumer culture and qualitative methods expanded through course work and discussions with Dr. Emily West. An early paper I wrote for Dr. West guided my interest in consumer citizenship, while a discussion I had with Dr. West after my comprehensive exams led me to settle on the Bravo cable network as my object of study. During the writing process, Dr. West provided valuable feedback that pushed me to clarify my arguments. My interest in television and film studies grew through course work and discussions with Dr. Shawn Shimpach. He offered valuable direction regarding historical research that helped guide my methodology. Moreover, Dr. Shimpach's thoughtful critique in the editing stage enabled me to strengthen my scholarly voice.

Dr. Julie Graham (1945-2010) began serving on my dissertation committee when I audited a course with her in Fall 2009. While I only knew Dr. Graham for a short period of time, her approach to political economy pushed me to think about the tensions between structure and agency in more nuanced ways. I am thankful to have been touched by Dr. Graham's intellectual rigor, generosity, and humanity. Her willingness to participate in my prospectus defense in February 2010, despite being out of the country for the semester, is representative of the commitment she offered all the students she mentored. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Nancy Folbre's participation in my dissertation committee. I greatly appreciate her willingness to commit her time to my scholarly development. Dr. Folbre's work as a feminist economist has influenced my understanding of the tensions between gender, economics, and consumer citizenship. Moreover, her insightful feedback has pushed me to clarify the theoretical and causal issues at stake in my dissertation research.

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arose through Dr. Gencarella's mentoring during my course work and in preparation for my comprehensive exams.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank my family for their support. First, I would like to thank my parents, Elaine and Dennis O'Keeffe. There was a time early in my college career when I faced personal and academic struggles. Still, my parents never gave up on me. Without their emotional and financial support I would not be where I am today. Like my parents, my brother Kevin O'Keeffe believed in me when I did not believe in myself. Kevin provided me with strength during my tumultuous college years, and he introduced me to my husband, David Brzenchek. Throughout my time in the doctoral program, Dave was willing to make personal sacrifices to support my professional goals. From the five hour drives he endured each weekend from Wilkes-Barre to Shutesbury and his understanding when I was immersed in my writing and not the best company, to his support when I took a lecturer position at The Pennsylvania State University while I was finishing my dissertation, Dave's commitment and selflessness never faltered. I am grateful for Dave's love, support, and encouragement. Last but not least, my canine companions also need to be thanked. Bentley (1996-2012) and Blackjack (1997-2012) provided me unconditional love for fifteen years. Today, I am blessed to have Casper and Coal in my life.



## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE CABLE NETWORK IN AN ERA OF DIGITAL MEDIA: BRAVO AND THE CONSTRAINTS OF CONSUMER CITIZENSHIP**

MAY 2014

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This dissertation takes a historiographical approach to the evolution of cable television over thirty years. Case analysis of archival data is used to trace the trajectory of the Bravo cable network from 1980 through 2010. My dissertation is a vital contribution to critical cultural studies, feminist studies, citizenship studies, and media history because it historicizes the role branding, commodification, and convergence played in Bravo's evolution from a highbrow arts programmer guided by bourgeois consumer citizenship, to a affluent lifestyle network guided by nouveau riche consumer citizenship.

My combination of production studies and political economic analysis gives visibility to the interpenetrating relations between branding, commodification, and convergence at the micro and macro levels. I argue cable television and its networks shaped and were shaped by the cultural, political economic, and technological processes of the media landscape. Still, I conclude that Bravo's commercial metamorphosis over three decades is a tragic example that is representative of the ways institutional practices are constrained by the structural parameters of the

media landscape. Bravo's twenty-first century status as an affluent lifestyle network driven by brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence supports this claim. Bravo's shift to affluent lifestyle entertainment has left an indelible mark on gendered programming in the digital media landscape. I argue that this ostentatious form of branded entertainment uses irony and conspicuous lifestyle as aesthetic commodities to support the iteration of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship, and I show how this happens across interconnected texts, platforms, and industries reliant upon cybernetic commodification.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: CABLE TELEVISION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

In November 2009, less than a year after President Obama took office, he held his first White House state dinner honoring Republic of India Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, and his partner, Mrs. Gursharan Kaur. The day following the state dinner, the diplomatic event became etched in America's cultural history. The reason; a prospective cast member for *The Real Housewives of D.C.* (Micheale Salahi), and her husband (Tarque Salahi), evaded various levels of White House security to attend the state dinner as uninvited guests.

The couple first approached the east gate of the White House by automobile. Following their unsuccessful attempt to get into the White House state dinner via the east gate, the couple got out of their vehicle, accompanied by a production crew that included a female makeup assistant – who fixed the female party crasher's make-up and powdered the male party crashers forehead – and at least one camera operator (Cooper & Stelter, 2009a). Then, the aspiring reality television star and her husband seamlessly integrated themselves into a line of guests for the state dinner at a pedestrian entrance for the White House. Given that Mrs. Salahi was a prospective cast member for *The Real Housewives of D.C.*, Bravo producers were present to film the arrival. Moreover, in the press frenzy following the incident, *The Today Show* – a morning staple for Bravo's Parent company, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) – landed a follow-up interview with the



White House party crashers.<sup>1</sup> I believe this well-known incident offers valuable insights into the role that convergence, branding, and commodification play in the cultural, political economic, and technological reach of the twenty-first century digital media landscape.

First, NBC Universal's actions give visibility to the role that broadcast and cable convergence plays in the day-to-day activities of synergistic media conglomerates in the digital media landscape, and how this type of incestuous relationship is elided in news discourse. In this instance, NBC News positioned the interview as "the result of hard journalism and old-fashion hustle" (Stelter, 2009, p. 4). NBC's journalistic hubris is egregious given the incestuous relations that led to Lauer's interview with Michaele Salahi and her husband. Still, a larger concern is how Matt Lauer handled the interview. Not only did the host refrain from asking Michaele any questions about *The Real Housewives of D.C.*; he also failed to disclose any information surrounding Bravo's filming of the party crashing or Michaele's links to Bravo, *The Real Housewives of D.C.*, and NBC Universal (Stelter, 2009). Second, Michaele's reliance on self-disclosure and transparency exemplifies the new role self-branding plays in the neoliberal participatory culture that characterizes the digital media landscape. Most notably, Michaele, an aspiring reality star willing to offer details of her day-to-day life for consumption, was filmed by Bravo when she crashed the White House state dinner. Then,

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<sup>1</sup> Hotly pursued by various major television networks the couple initially agreed to appear, and a day later cancelled their appearance on *Larry King Live*. According to an unnamed NBC staff member "the couple selected Mr. Lauer in a good-will gesture to NBC, and, by extension Bravo" (Stelter, 2009, p. 4).

immediately following the event, she posted pictures with prominent political figures (e.g. Joe Biden and Rahm Emanuel) on her Facebook page (Cooper & Stelter, 2009a). Finally, the aggressive and effective self-branding Michaele engaged in led to judgment and critique in the popular press. Still, it also turned her into a marketable commodity with significant exchange value, and led to her being cast in *The Real Housewives of D.C.*<sup>2</sup> Like the female stars for the various installments of *The Real Housewives* that preceded the reality franchise's D.C. rendition, Michaele's role as a cast member on *The Real Housewives of D.C.* came with a hefty six figure salary. Simultaneously, endorsements deals and public appearances added to her potential monetary gain (Cooper & Stelter, 2009b).

My interest lies in how cable television and its networks highlight problematic tensions amongst the cultural, political economic, and technological realms of the twenty-first century digital media landscape. The actions of Michaele Salahi, Bravo, and, NBC Universal are the norm in a climate characterized by branding, commodification, and convergence. First, the phenomenon by which individual subjects seek fame via self-branding is commonplace due to the personal benefits derived from self-commodification. Second, cable networks driven by multiplatform branded entertainment that caters to the lifestyle interests of niche audiences now dominate the media landscape. Finally, the vast majority of these cable networks are owned by media conglomerates with

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<sup>2</sup> As a thin White woman with facial features that are deemed attractive and bodily traits that are viewed as sexually appealing by heterosexual males, Michaele aligned with the physical expectations for female commodities in the digital media landscape.

substantial market power that engage in synergistic relations amongst multiple entertainment properties.

### **Why Bravo?**

The dynamic tensions amongst the industries, texts, platforms, and users that constitute the digital media landscape offer risks and possibilities. Still, these political technologies are reliant upon commercial interest, they are sustained through regulatory practices that favor corporations in the seemingly free market, and they are grounded in ceaseless capital accumulation. The natural status afforded to these neoliberal values warrant attention, as does the digital media landscape's popularity and ubiquity in American culture. Branding, commodification, and convergence are three distinct discursive and material practices that are entangled in a dense web throughout the commercial industries that dominate the digital media landscape.

Bravo is a case example that illustrates how branding, commodification, and convergence have evolved over three decades in the media landscape. The comprehensive historical archive I have constructed spans thirty years, from 1980 (Bravo's founding year) through 2010. My detailed historiographical analysis examines the shifting interrelations amongst branding, commodification, and convergence, while it also assesses how these three discursive and material entities have contributed to, and have been shaped by, a neoliberal form of consumer citizenship that foregrounds market-based consumption. This individualistic form of citizenship hails the rational consumer and presents consumer practices as the most effective route to individual sovereignty and

democratic well-being (Miller, 2007). My research traces the shift from the bourgeois consumer citizenship of the twentieth century to the nouveau riche consumer citizenship of the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the evolution of consumer citizenship at Bravo parallels the way consumer citizenship has been articulated over three decades in the media landscape.

Throughout most of the 1980s, Bravo was a “premium” cable network. Still, Bravo did not fit neatly into the category of premium cable network. On the one hand, like premium competitors Home Box Office (HBO) and Showtime, Bravo relied solely on subscription revenue and did not air advertisements. On the other hand, in the realm of program content, Bravo was comparable to basic cable networks like the History channel, American Movie Classic (AMC), and Discovery, as well as the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). Bravo aligned with the political economic climate of premium cable and the programming climate of basic cable. Still, a major convergence amongst all of these cable networks comes via their unequivocal reliance on bourgeois consumer citizenship. They all attained social legitimacy via a brand identity grounded in class distinction.<sup>4</sup> And, to varying degrees, all of these cable networks capitalized on the cultural value of highbrow arts programming (e.g. foreign films, documentaries, and classical music) in the

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<sup>3</sup> Both of these forms of consumer citizenship are grounded in neoliberal values. Still, there are important differences between the two. Bourgeois consumer citizenship presumes the social legitimacy of social, political economic, and cultural values tied to “old wealth” (e.g. informal/formal education, economic security, and cultural capital). In contrast, nouveau riche consumer citizenship presumes the social legitimacy of social, political economic, and cultural values tied to “new wealth” (e.g. self-branding, affluence, and lifestyle interests).

<sup>4</sup> Following Bourdieu (1984), class distinction speaks to the role that assets such as formal education, economic resources, and cultural capital play in societal stratification.

1980s. Through detailed historiographical analysis grounded in mid-level industry studies,<sup>5</sup> I illustrate the cultural benefits and political economic limitations of Bravo's sole reliance on highbrow arts programming in the 1980s. The value of the Bravo brand came via the cable networks' exclusive use of niche content that purportedly had more "substance" than that of network television, and was devoid of, or had limited commercial imperatives. This brand identity became untenable as Bravo navigated the rise of postnetwork television.

In the early 1990s, in alignment with political economic shifts in the television landscape, Bravo turned to basic cable. Bravo was no longer sold as a distinct entity that warranted its own subscription fee. Instead, Bravo was bundled with other basic cable networks. Now, Bravo's program content and revenue model resembled A&E, AMC, and Discovery. Like these basic cable networks, Bravo was packaged with other cable channels and sold for a minimal subscription fee. Accordingly, advertising and audience commodification were of the utmost importance to Bravo's new revenue model. Bravo's new reliance on PBS-style corporate sponsorship increased its resemblance to the esteemed American broadcaster. In fact, Bravo aired program content that failed on broadcast television due to low ratings (e.g. *Twin Peaks*), and Bravo sold this content to their potential audience via the presumption that it was too sophisticated for broadcast television. Bravo's cultural superiority still relied on aesthetic hierarchies that

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<sup>5</sup> Mid-level industry studies, or production studies, is a type of analysis that attends to the practices and people that give life to an organization entity. This type of research can be contrasted with macro level political economic analysis. Still, I am interested in the interaction between the micro and the macro. Bravo's historical trajectory exemplifies how over three decades, mid-level industry functioning became aligned with and shaped macro level political economic practices.

misleadingly positioned cable as the new political technology that would lead to cultural democracy. Simultaneously, Bravo also sought to expand its commercial appeal, and by the end of the 1990s, Bravo transitioned to a traditional advertising format.<sup>6</sup> My nuanced historiographical analysis traces the expansion of commodification and convergence in the emerging digital media landscape. As Bravo slowly and methodically conformed to the commercial imperatives that characterized network television, and navigated a climate increasingly characterized by digital convergence, the dissonance between what Bravo claimed to be and what it was becoming generated a fractured brand identity.

The findings from my study of the 2000s demonstrate the new role Bravo played in shaping branding, commodification, and convergence following NBC's 2002 acquisition of the cable network.<sup>7</sup> Starting with *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Bravo received a new level of pop culture visibility. Still, Bravo was in a very transitory state between 2003 and 2005, and mainstream newspapers and trade journals paid limited attention to the gay male audience that *Queer Eye* brought to Bravo. Then, in the mid-2000s Bravo engaged in a strategic rebranding effort that led the cable network to increasingly rely on gender commodification. This was readily apparent in an array of paratexts that engaged shifts in Bravo's core audience, institutional practices, and production practices.

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout the decade, as the needs of advertisers became more paramount, all basic cable networks struggled to balance niche content and specialized interests on the one hand, and mass content and popular interests on the other.

<sup>7</sup> NBC purchased Bravo in fall 2002. In summer 2003 *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was the first signature program aired under the new ownership.

My findings suggest that Bravo leaves its most indelible mark on the digital media landscape in the second half of the 2000s, as it strategically uses brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence to engage gendered viewers across an array of interconnected texts, industries, and platforms. Bravo's turn to a gendered audience meant the cable network began to sell itself as a primary venue for influential middle-class women via content grounded in lifestyle, affluence, and consumption. In fact, as the 2000s progressed Bravo led the way as NBC Universal delved into new ventures. Most notably, Bravo's viability as a gendered cable network led to its primary role in the formation of Women@NBCU, a strategic and well-branded marketing initiative that maximizes advertising synergy amongst all NBC Universal's female-oriented properties and content. Women@NBCU exemplifies the role that monitoring and surveillance play in the production of valuable cybernetic commodities, as well as the role that the collection, organization, and packaging of consumer data play in capital accumulation. Together, the Bravo cable network and Women@NBCU provide insight into the integral role that brand cultures, niche commodification, and convergence play in the twenty-first century digital media landscape. Ultimately, I argue that Bravo's affluent lifestyle entertainment supports the discursive and material iteration of a gendered form of nouveau riche consumer citizenship<sup>8</sup> grounded in capitalist patriarchy.<sup>9</sup> Still, this is not just about Bravo. I

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<sup>8</sup> I situate nouveau riche consumer citizenship as a depoliticized form of citizenship that celebrates the neoliberal ideals of personal choice and self-branding; glorifies consumption and production in the capitalist market; and encourages aspirational consumption across various lifestyle realms (e.g. food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture).

argue that affluent lifestyle entertainment is a new form of programming content that spans an array of interconnected text, industries, and platforms across various genres.

Bravo's story can and has been told with limited attention to the decades that preceded the cable network's sale to NBC in 2002. In fact, various scholars have examined Bravo's audience and programming content in the later half of the 2000s (Miller, 2005; Sender, 2006; Cox, 2012; and Smith, 2012). What makes my research unique is the nuanced attention to midlevel institutional operations and production practices over the span of three decades. My primary contribution comes from the pragmatic value of an approach to case analysis grounded in historiography. Bravo did not transform overnight from a cable network driven by highbrow arts programming and bourgeois consumer citizenship to a cable network reliant upon affluent lifestyle entertainment and nouveau riche consumer citizenship. Quite the contrary, my research shows how Bravo slowly and methodically evolved from a small cable network shaped by the processes of branding, commodification, and convergence in the television industry, to a central property in a transnational media conglomerate that has shaped the role brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence play in gendered entertainment. The sections that follow examine the methodological

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<sup>9</sup> The literature review in chapter 2 explains the role "patriarchal capitalism" and "capitalist patriarchy" have played in television representations of women. I argue "patriarchal capitalism" is characterized by selflessness, domesticity, and traditional family lifestyle. Alternatively, I use the term "capitalist patriarchy" to signify television representations of women grounded in self-pleasing, hyper-sexuality, and affluent lifestyle.



theory and research design that ground this research, and provide an overview of my dissertation chapters.

### **Methodological Theory**

My critical approach to media analysis foregrounds the complex tensions amongst the political economic, technological, and cultural processes that are continually being formed and reformed (Mosco, 2010) in the digital media landscape. To engage the midlevel processes, practices, and people that have shaped Bravo's historical trajectory, and to elucidate how my industry level examination converges and diverges with macro level political economic analysis, I turn to production studies. Following Havens, Lotz, & Tinic (2009), I rely on micro level institutional operations and production practices to assess how the Bravo brand, Bravo's program content, and Bravo's audience are conceptualized and engaged. Critical media industry studies, or production studies, connects political economic analysis to subject formation, while still remaining mindful of production hierarchies (Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009).

Gender is one type of subject formation that has played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in how the television industry conceptualizes the audience commodity (Meehan, 2002). By incorporating feminist methodology, this study addresses the role capitalism and patriarchy play as a discursive and material entity that shapes how audiences think about and engage a vast array of media texts, technologies, and industries. The interrelated trajectories of capitalism and patriarchy (Riordan, 2002) are focal points that allow for reflection on the tensions amongst gender, consumption, and citizenship in the twenty-first century digital

media landscape. My feminist analysis of Bravo expands upon our understanding of television within a postnetwork environment characterized by identity politics. Through Bravo we are given a glimpse of the formidable role irony plays as program distributors construct, manage, market, and sell a gendered audience commodity.

As Foucault (1995) has established, the mutually constitutive relations between a production apparatus, which can sustain and use subjects, and disciplinary techniques, which support subject management and generate capital accumulation, highlight the intertwined nature of political economic and technological imperatives. As a scholar studying the tensions amongst consumption, citizenship, and popular culture, I believe it is essential to address the political economic and technological realms of the digital media landscape. This is especially true when we take into account our daily reliance on multiple interconnected technological platforms that tout a market mentality in relation to differences between social groups (Miller, 2007). Following Toby Miller (2007), I problematize the for-profit political economic structure of the digital media landscape to expose the role that inequality and injustice play in the struggle between the consumer and the citizen. Simultaneously, I examine how a neoliberal cultural and political economic grounded in privatization has guided technological developments and given life to nouveau riche consumer citizenship.

To unearth cultural discourse surrounding the Bravo cable network, I examine a vast array of paratexts – including, but not limited to, mass media coverage, ratings, merchandising, and promos (Gray, 2010). My interests lies in the

various interconnected texts, platforms, and industries that shape and order cultural discourse (Couldry, 2000). Following Elizabeth Bird, I attempt to highlight “particular moments of cultural media interaction” across the multiple platforms and texts that span Bravo’s historical trajectory (2003, p. 8). At its core, Bravo’s historical trajectory elucidates how branding, commodification, and convergence have evolved over three decades in the media landscape.

I rely on a historiographical approach to assess the convergences and divergences amongst political economic, technological, and cultural processes. Historiography is a methodological process that relies on the construction of an “archive,” or a comprehensive collection of documents. Sophisticated historiography can elucidate the role social construction plays in the topic under analysis; moreover, it can serve as “a lesson in the constructedness of everything” (Nerone, 2006, p. 95). I use my historical archive of Bravo to bring visibility to the social construction of branding, commodification, and convergence in the digital media landscape over three decades. To examine the interrelationships amongst these processes, and the nature and scope of their growth, I rely on Guy Debord’s notion of “spectacle” (1967/2012). Debord’s Marxist orientation aptly represents the privileged position afforded to twenty-first century commercial platforms that naturalize and celebrate an image-based lifestyle guided by exchange value.

It is important to highlight that the materials compiled for my archive are visual and textual “representations” of Bravo’s history, as told by industry executives, industry journalists, and mainstream journalists who have made selections regarding what they perceive to be noteworthy. These “privileged

insiders” are incapable of re-presenting “everything” that happened, as is any human being. While my analysis is constrained by “untold” histories, I have created a comprehensive archive that moves beyond sampling to provide a representative picture of Bravo’s history within the digital media landscape.

As are all scholars, I am guided by personal and professional investments that shape my research (Maxwell, 2005). My professional and personal desire to interrogate the interpenetrating cultural, technological, and political economic processes that call subjects into being is guided by a fundamental belief that individuals contribute to the construction of reality through the material and discursive practices they engage in each day. Still, I have profound personal and professional concern with how commercially oriented brand cultures, driven by niche commodification and multiplatform convergence, incessantly amplify a form of nouveau riche consumer citizenship grounded in postmodern irony. More specifically, I am interested in how the nouveau riche consumer citizenship that characterizes gendered content in the digital media landscape supports the goal of capitalist patriarchy.

### **Research Design**

The political economic, technological, and cultural analysis undertaken in my dissertation relies on a historical archive to trace the development of Bravo from 1980 to 2010. The selection of this time period was guided by Bravo’s founding in 1980, as well as scholarly research that positions the mid-80s as the

beginning of the “multi-channel transition era” (Lotz, 2007a).<sup>10</sup> Textual analysis of archival data is used to investigate the cultural, political economic, and technological developments within the television industry that laid the foundation for Bravo’s growth as a cable network, and to trace Bravo’s rise as the go-to place for affluent lifestyle entertainment. The documents that compose my archive are: (1) print media sources – newspapers and trade journals – accessed and compiled via various databases, such as Lexis-Nexis, Proquest, and EBSCO; (2) business histories accessed and compiled via Directory of Company Histories and Proquest Historical Annual Reports; (3) market reports accessed through sources such as Forrester Research and Mintel Reports; (4) industry and programming Websites for Bravo, Cablevision, Rainbow Programming, and NBC; and (5) miscellaneous video and text documents identified via general Internet searches on search engines like Google and Yahoo.

As indicated above, I compiled my archive by conducting a variety of Internet and database searches. I utilized specific search terms related to Bravo and its programming, as well as more general search terms guided by commercial television, to ensure that I was getting an accurate representation of Bravo’s role in the digital media landscape. Specific search terms that I utilized included, but were not limited to: “Bravo,” “Bravo cable network,” “Real Housewives,” “Million Dollar Listing,” “NYC Prep,” “Top Chef,” and “Project Runway.” General search terms

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<sup>10</sup> The multi-channel transition era allowed for new levels of choice and control for viewers due to: the development of new broadcast networks, the rise of cable and satellite, the remote control, and the VCR. In contrast, the post-network era currently characterizes the television landscape as broadcast, cable, and satellite providers navigate cultural, technological and industrial shifts that fundamentally redefine “... the medium and the business of television” (Lotz, 2007a, p. 20).

included, but were not limited to: “broadcast television,” “cable television,” “reality television,” and “reality television programming.”

Periodicals provided the most comprehensive coverage of Bravo. The two types of periodicals selected – trade publications and newspapers – require a more detailed discussion. First, it is important to note that the trade publications and newspapers under analysis are part of the digital media landscape as I define it. More specifically, trade journals and newspapers are two types of publications that help to constitute what has been referred to as the “print” sector.<sup>11</sup> These two types of periodicals discuss, conceptualize, shape, and are shaped by other sectors of the digital media landscape (e.g. television and the Internet), as well as programming content and audiences. The trade journals selected included, but were not limited to: *Cable World*, *Broadcasting and Cable*, *Brandweek*, *Advertising Age*, *Mediaweek*, *Adweek* and *Variety*.<sup>12</sup> These seven trade journals were selected due to their use and prominence in their respective industries. The selected trade publications display both similarities and differences. Broadly speaking, all of the trade journals selected attend to: the broadcast television industry, the cable television industry, the marketing/advertising industries, and the entertainment industry in a variety of ways. Depending on the publication, one or more of these realms is privileged. *Cable World* and *Broadcasting & Cable* focus specifically on cable and broadcast television, while *Media Week* and *Variety* provide a broader

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<sup>11</sup> The “print” distinction is only used for clarification, as the periodicals that compose this sector are accessible in print and electronic forms.

<sup>12</sup> The trade journals listed provided the most substantial amount of trade journal coverage on Bravo. Yet general database searches that resulted in articles from other trade journals were not excluded.

picture of the entertainment industry. In contrast, *Brandweek*, *Advertising Age*, and *Adweek* attend more closely to branding, marketing, and advertising.

Trade journals offer a more industry-oriented view when compared to newspapers. The discussions of programming and audiences in trade journals are guided more heavily by industry jargon (e.g. rating, demographics, and psychographics). While newspapers clearly talk about the aforementioned examples to some degree. The frequency and depth of coverage afforded to these types of topics is much more prevalent in trade journals. Moreover, historically newspapers have been seen a vital source of information in a healthy democracy, while this important civic aspect of newspapers has “tended to” be sidelined on behalf of commercial interests, a modicum of attention to public interests is still minimally required, and at times more than that is provided. The United States newspapers that composed my archive included, but were not limited to: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The San Diego Union Tribune*, and *The Washington Post*. These newspapers were selected based on their cultural prominence and geographical span.<sup>13</sup>

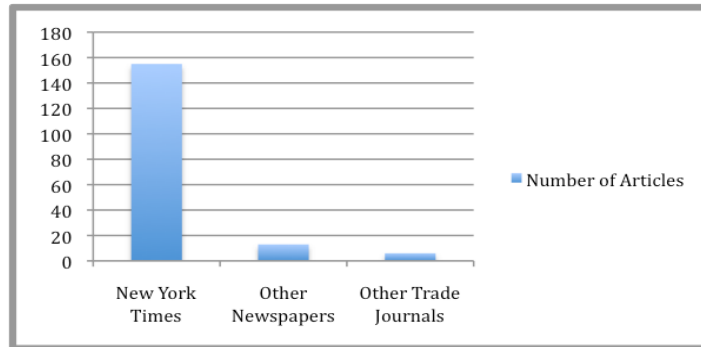
To identify gaps in periodical coverage, I created a chart that listed the number of articles in each publication year-by-year. Even before I did this it was clear that *The New York Times* – responsible for 155 of the 174 periodical articles from 1980 though 1989 – was over represented in the 1980s (see figure 1). Considering that Bravo was founded in 1980 by the Long Island cable provider

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<sup>13</sup> The newspapers listed provided the most substantial amount of newspaper coverage on Bravo. Yet general database searches that resulted in articles from other newspapers were not excluded.

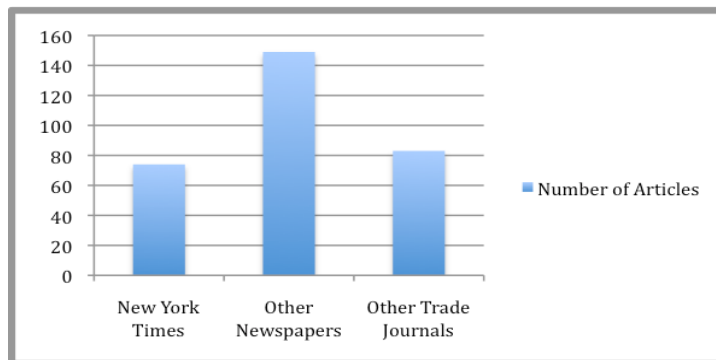
Cablevision, the over representation of *The New York Times* made sense. However, I did new individual searches for each of the trade journals and newspapers listed above to ensure the comprehensive nature of my archive.

**Figure 1: Bravo's Periodical Coverage in the 1980s**



The 1990s (see figure 2) offered a wider span of articles across newspapers – *The Washington Post* (124 articles), *The New York Times* (74 articles), *The San Diego Union Tribune* (24 articles) and *The Wall Street Journal* (3 articles). Trade journal coverage of Bravo was sparse but increased throughout the 1990s, with a total of 83 trade journal articles for the entire decade – *Advertising Age* (15), *Adweek* (8), *Brand Week* (3), *Cable World* (4), *Media Week* (19) and *Variety* (34).

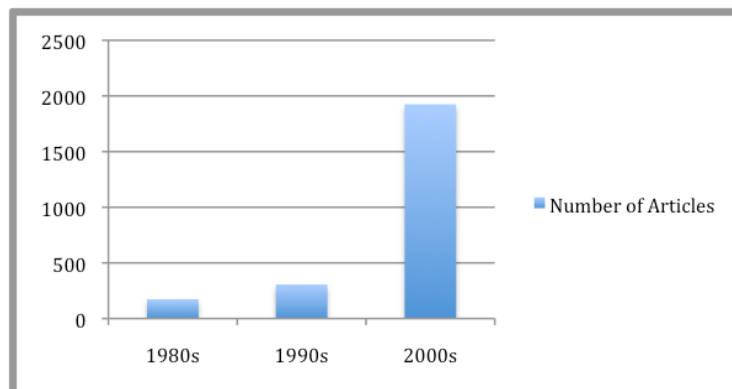
**Figure 2: Bravo's Periodical Coverage in the 1990s**





Generally speaking, the coverage of Bravo in newspapers and trade journals prior to 2000 makes sense for a few reasons. First, as was previously stated, over-representation in *The New York Times* during the 1980s speaks to Cablevision and Bravo's central role in New York. Second, the increasing coverage in *The Washington Post* and *The San Diego Union Tribune* aligns with Cablevision and Bravo's expansion in the 1990s. In contrast, the increasing trade journal coverage from the 1980s (6 articles) to the 1990s (83 articles), and the predominance of trade journal articles in the latter half of the 1990s (68/83 articles), aligns with important revenue shifts at Bravo. Periodical coverage of Bravo in the 2000s dominated (see figure 3), with 1,925 out of the 2,405 articles that compose my archive coming from the twenty-first century. This makes sense, given Bravo's sale to NBC in 2002, and its subsequent rise as a cable network in-tune with popular culture.

**Figure 3: Bravo's Periodical Coverage 1980 - 2010**



NVIVO software supported thematic coding of over 2,000 archival texts. Initially, thematic coding relied on broad terms that I selected based on my theoretical/methodological grounding,<sup>14</sup> as well as terms I selected based on the preliminary analysis of data.<sup>15</sup> Data coding helped to generate central themes within and across the decades under analysis. Throughout the process of analyzing the data and writing my dissertation, I tweaked, altered, and refined my understanding of the primary themes that span Bravo's historical trajectory. For example, my use of the specific terms "highbrow arts programming" and "affluent lifestyle entertainment" came with refinement. In this instance, early in my research, "highbrow programming" and the "cultural arts" appeared as a prominent theme in the 1980s/1990s, whereas "affluence" and "lifestyle" appeared as prominent themes in the 2000s. Having provided an overview of the research design, I now move on to review my dissertation chapters.

### **Dissertation Chapters**

*Chapter One, "Cable Television in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,"* serves as the introduction to my dissertation. In this chapter, I contextualize my case analysis of the Bravo cable network by identifying and discussing the three themes that span

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<sup>14</sup> Terms included, but are not limited to: advertising/marketing (e.g. ratings, demographics, psychographics, product placement, and lifestyle); branding (e.g. brand management, brand expansion, branded entertainment, and self-branding); television (e.g. cable, broadcast, and reality); programming (e.g. original, reality, and syndicated); programming characteristics (e.g. prime time, cultural capital, conspicuous consumption, and nouveau riche); audience (e.g. mass, niche, and fragmentation); technology (e.g. interactivity, choice, and convergence); and consumption (e.g. aspirational, celebrity, and luxury).

<sup>15</sup> Here it was common for me to fine-tune my data coding based on consistent themes across periodicals. For example in the realm of "programming characteristics" I added cultural, highbrow, and attention grabbing. Whereas, the attention to reality television program content and characters starting in the early-to-mid 2000s lead me to develop two new categories. Reality TV content – terms like authentic, ironic, and recession proof – and reality TV characters, which included terms like: vanity, vulnerability, and perfect pitch casting.

Bravo's historical trajectory: branding, commodification, and convergence. Then, I situate Bravo as an object of study, explain the methodological grounding and research design for my project, and provide a synopsis of each chapter in my dissertation.

The theoretical scope for my dissertation research is presented in *Chapter Two*, "Theorizing the Digital Media Landscape in a Postfeminist Climate." The four subsections that compose this comprehensive literature review – "Consumer Citizenship and American Culture," "From the Network Era to the Democratic Promises of Niche Audiences," "Spectacle, Bodies, and Capital," and "Affluent Lifestyle Entertainment, Gender, and Consumer Citizenship" – are organized thematically. This chapter spans disciplinary boundaries (cultural studies, macro level political economic analysis, production studies, consumer/citizenship studies, and feminist studies) and various areas of specialization (political economy of communication, consumer studies, citizenship studies, television studies, and critical cultural studies) to provide a transdisciplinary theoretical model for my dissertation research.

*Chapter Three*, "Historicizing Bravo," introduces Bravo as a premium cable network that provides highbrow arts programming to bourgeois consumer citizens. This chapter offers historical insight into the role that federal regulation, industry convergence, and the cultural and regulatory climate in New York played in Bravo's constitution as a premium cable network founded in 1980. Following this historical contextualization, I use archival documents to trace the textual and industry practices that shaped Bravo as a neophyte cable network in the 1980s. My

case analysis of Bravo in this chapter exemplifies the shift from network to post-network TV underway in the 1980s media landscape. I demonstrate this shift via midlevel industry discourse that engages the tensions amongst class, market-based belonging, niche audiences, and the democratic viability of cable technology.

*Chapter Four, "Cable and Broadcast TV in the 1990s: From Categorically Different to Blurred Boundaries,"* addresses Bravo's rise to commercial viability in the 1990s. Market-based belonging, niche audiences, and cable technology continue to play a fundamental role in chapter four as Bravo – a cable network driven by bourgeois consumer citizenship – increased viewership and acquired a larger awareness as a nation-wide highbrow arts cable network. My midlevel industry analysis of the processes and practices that shaped this cable network in the 1990s is guided by Bravo's transition to a dual revenue model, first via corporate sponsorship and then via traditional advertising. I examine the tension between Bravo's highbrow roots and its new mainstream orientation as I delve into the role that promotion, reruns, and signature shows played in Bravo's conflicted brand identity in the 1990s.

*Chapter Five, "From Highbrow Arts to Affluent Lifestyle Entertainment,"* examines the decade in which Bravo gained its pop culture ubiquity. Critical media industry studies and feminist studies serve as the bedrock for this chapter as I examine the institutional operations, practices, and executives that supported Bravo's transition from a highbrow cultural arts network to and affluent lifestyle entertainment network. The first half of the chapter situates Bravo as a cable network in a state of transition. I trace the formative role Bravo's acquisition of

*The West Wing* played in its rise as commercially driven cable network attuned to mainstream appeal. Then, I examine how new parent company NBC propelled Bravo and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* to pop culture stardom via synergistic promotional efforts, and assess how these practices influenced NBC's spring 2004 merger with Vivendi Universal. The second half of the chapter attends to Bravo's rise as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network. Here, I highlight how Bravo's affluent lifestyle entertainment uses irony and conspicuous lifestyle to support the goals of capitalist patriarchy, and illustrate the formative role that strategic rebranding played in Bravo's rise as a gendered cable network. Finally, I delve into how Bravo's purported "ownership" of a gendered audience guided the formation of a multi-platform marketing initiative that packages and sells gendered viewers to advertisers across all of NBC Universal's female-oriented entertainment properties.

*Chapter Six, "A Case Analysis of Project Runway: From A Lackluster Premier to Pop Culture Fame"* delves in to the reality fashion competition that followed *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. My case analysis of *Project Runway* relies on feminist media studies and production studies to examine the role that *Project Runway* played in Bravo's rise as an affluent lifestyle network driven by nouveau riche consumer citizenship. I situate *Project Runway* as a form of affluent lifestyle entertainment and examine how it resembles and moves beyond its most prominent predecessor, *Sex and the City*. Furthermore, I establish the political economic and cultural value of *Project Runway* in the twenty-first century digital

media landscape and assess the implications this has for our understanding of gendered entertainment.

*Chapter Seven, "Consumption, Politics, and Women's Television: The Rise of The Real Housewives (MEME) Franchise,"* turns to the reality docudrama that followed *Project Runway*. I rely on feminist media studies and production studies to unravel the cultural and political economic value of this transmedia franchise. My analysis highlights how the branding and commodification of dysfunctional female characters in *The Real Housewives* franchise supports the iteration of nouveau riche consumer citizenship. In particular, I attend to how problematic stereotypes surrounding the relations between gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality influenced the articulation of nouveau riche gendered wealth amongst the various installments.

*Chapter Eight, "The Multi-Screen Viewer in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,"* concludes my dissertation. Here I highlight the results of my case analysis of the Bravo cable network and assess the implications of my findings for the political economy of communication and critical cultural studies. More specifically, I engage the intertwined nature of brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence in my case analysis of the Bravo cable network and highlight the implications this has for power and constraint in the digital media landscape. Particular attention is given to concerns surrounding affluent lifestyle entertainment, postfeminist, and nouveau rich consumer citizenship in the twenty-first century digital media landscape.

## **Conclusion**

I started this introductory chapter by highlighting an incident that engaged the tensions amongst: a corporate parent with substantial market power (NBC), a cable network grounded in commercial imperatives (Bravo), and a woman seeking fame (Michaele Salahi). To conclude, I highlight the implications of the White House party crashing for the iteration of consumer citizenship, and I demonstrate what this kind of political economic analysis can tell us about the twenty-first century digital media landscape.

First, Michaele's aggressive and effective lobbying effort to be cast on *The Real Housewives of D.C.* highlights the cultural value afforded to self-branding and commodification in contemporary American popular culture. Her effort to attain societal notoriety through personal disclosure, which spanned multiple technological platforms, exemplifies the importance of personal surveillance and convergence in the day-to-day lives of individuals in the digital media landscape. Michaele's actions make sense within the current social context. As we know, giving visibility to one's lifestyle interests and consumption practices aligns with the neoliberal cultural, political economic, and technological climate that plagues contemporary America. In fact, Michaele Salahi can be seen as an example of the "ideal" consumer citizen: she made effective use of self-branding and personal surveillance; effectively sold herself as a commodity; and individually benefited from textual, platform, and industry convergence in the digital media landscape.

Second, given Bravo's political economic status as a for-profit, commercially driven cable network owned by media conglomerate NBC Universal, it is

unsurprising that Bravo cast Michaele Salahi and used footage from the White House incident for *The Real Housewives of D.C.* If we reflect on this via the lens of branding, we find that Michaele Salahi's fame-seeking antics at the White House state dinner evokes Bravo's brand identity. To go even further, Michaele's actions and her media persona are perfectly matched to an insider approach to reality television reliant upon a media-savvy audience aware of, and able to laugh at, vulnerable and vain personas. Whereas Bravo's willingness to support the extreme antics of an aspiring reality television contestant seeking to stand out, relies upon, generates, and reinforces the importance of self-branding and commodification in the day-to-day lives of female viewers. As we will see in later chapters, a postfeminist ethos grounded in nouveau riche consumer citizenship is a signature feature of Bravo's original reality television programming. This well-branded trope relies on irony as an aesthetic commodity to sell content, products, and services to media-savvy female viewers via branded entertainment, lifestyle affluence, and conspicuous consumption that span an array of texts and platforms.

Finally NBC Universal's access to Michaele Salahi, and Matt Lauer's omission of pertinent information regarding the contractual obligations that existed between NBC Universal and the prospective cast member for *The Real Housewives of D.C.*, highlight the role that industry convergence plays in the coverage of news stories. Ultimately, Bravo is part of a multiplatform transnational media conglomerate. NBC Universal's status as a transnational media conglomerate is materially sustained via a political economic model driven by market power and capital accumulation, and situated in a neoliberal cultural



discourse that positions technological interactivity and mass customization as the route to personal sovereignty and democratic well-being. Branding, commodification, and convergence are of the utmost importance for all commercially driven forms of media, and from an industry perspective, the more accepting audiences are of these practices, the better.

In closing, consumer citizenship has acquired a natural status in contemporary American culture that allows its constructed nature to go unquestioned. The digital media landscape plays a prominent role in how we understand technology, and how we perform as consumer citizens. In the “Epilogue” to *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics to of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Lizbeth Cohen argues that consumption and citizenship “became interlocking identities for most Americans” by the end of the twentieth century (2003, p. 409). Simultaneously, she emphasizes that the extent to which this linkage “facilitates or negates a politics that champions a democratically arrived at common good is open to question” (Cohen, 2003, p. 409). Cohen is correct; linkages between consumption and citizenship are not in and of themselves problematic. Nonetheless, the seemingly natural status afforded to our “rights” as consumers in the capitalist market displaces the collective “obligations” required in a vibrant and healthy democracy. The civic strength of consumption has been secured through a cultural lineage – both within and beyond the digital media landscape – that disregards the devastating political economic, social, and environmental consequences of market-based individualism (Miller, 2007).

I believe the digital media landscape supports the iteration of consumer citizenship via the complex interactions amongst interpenetrating cultural (e.g. branding), political economic (e.g. commodification), and technological (e.g. convergence) realms. Specific discursive and material practices shrouded in neoliberal rhetoric are instrumental to sustaining the cultural viability of consumer citizenship. My hope is that this dissertation will contribute to unraveling and understanding the dense web of consumer citizenship that characterizes the digital media landscape today, and that will most likely continue well into the future.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORIZING THE DIGITAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN A POSTFEMINIST CLIMATE

The term digital media landscape encompasses the complex interactions amongst texts, technological platforms, industries, and individuals. Despite this, my primary argument is that the expansion, intensification, and confluence of cultural (branding), political economic (commodification), and technological (convergence) processes has supported the growth of a digital media landscape characterized by neoliberal ideals and niche lifestyle. The overdetermined nature of the digital media landscape constrains individuals, yet the limits and constraints of the digital media landscape are not insurmountable structural realities that defy change. Instead, these limits and constraints are diffuse discursive and material practices that guide social relations.

My interest lies in the role branding, commodification, and convergence have played, and continue to play, in the discursive and material reification of consumer citizenship. All aspects of personhood are commodified in the digital media landscape, and sometimes that means consumer identities, consumer acts, and consumer values are tapped into for important social causes. Nonetheless, there is a cost associated with the branding and commodification of personhood across interconnected texts, mediums, and platforms driven by commercial interests. We lose something when any efforts at public support exist within a nation comprised of “simultaneously lived private worlds” (Berlant, 1997, p. 5). In the sections that follow, I trace the rise of a digital media landscape reliant upon self-governance and privatization. As we will see throughout this chapter, context

and history are of the utmost importance to understanding the hegemonic power of the interconnected political economic, cultural, and technological processes that constitute the digital media landscape.

### **Consumer Citizenship and American Culture**

The role that consumption practices play as “the route” to citizenship has deep roots in the United States. In contemporary America this individualist form of marketplace citizenship has developed into a central vehicle for class power, as market rights have become fused with democratic freedom (Harvey, 2010). The discursive and material traction of neoliberalism supports, sustains, and is enhanced by the rise of the consumer citizen. Neoliberalism is a term used to signify a shift in cultural and political economic values, a shift frequently linked to the 1980s and the rise of Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher. As argued by historian David Harvey (2005), neoliberal theory asserts that “contractual relations in the marketplace” serve as the best guide for human action. Government encroachment purportedly defies the logic of the “free” market and the needs of the sovereign consumer by limiting competition. Conversely, the “free” market is the only way to ensure consumer sovereignty, as competition in the market compels producers to respond to consumer preferences (Slater, 1997). From “free” trade and “free” markets, to niche interests and self-governance, privatization reigns in neoliberal theory. But why does this matter? Following media scholar Toby Miller (2007), I believe the niche interests of the sovereign consumer are instrumental to the technological, cultural, and political economic viability of the digital media landscape. As taste, choice, and lifestyle have come to

embody the dominant articulation of consumer citizenship within this landscape, macro level privatization has become wedded to technological democracy.<sup>16</sup>

From this perspective there are two issues. First, the conflation of privatization and technological democracy misleadingly assumes that individual access and choice in a commercial media climate driven by branding, commodification, and convergence can be equated with freedom and equality. Second, the presumption that sovereign consumers define their own needs (and, through their purchases, the commodities available in the “free” market) is at best incomplete, given that the ideals that ground consumer sovereignty defy the real practices (e.g. government infrastructural investment and industrial policy) that sustain capitalism in America (Fraser, 2009). This does not mean we are cultural dupes. Instead, ingrained discursive and material practices make it exceedingly difficult to step outside this overdetermined context.

Political economic and cultural shifts in post World War II America give visibility to the role that government<sup>17</sup> and industry<sup>18</sup> played in the expansion of

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<sup>16</sup> As we will see later in the chapter, historically entrenched discursive and material practices grounded in the promise of consumer flexibility, interactivity, and customization supported the shift from universal broadcasting to fee-based cable and satellite and the rise of a digital media landscape oriented toward brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence.

<sup>17</sup> The rise of a mass produced and affordable single family home – that needed to be filled with consumer durables – was aided by low interest rates, small down payments, long-term mortgages, property tax deductions and income tax benefits that came with home ownership (Cohen, 2003). Consumer durables, such as home furnishing (e.g. beds, tables and sofas) and appliances (e.g. refrigerators, televisions and washing machines) led to billions of dollars in transactions; for example, ownership of refrigerators rose “from 44 to 80 percent between 1940 and 1950” (Cohen, 2003, p. 123).

<sup>18</sup> Consumer credit brought about a “revolution in consumer purchasing” (Cohen, 2003, p. 123). In this context, the consumer “purchaser” ensured the economic viability of American society

mass consumption, the reconstruction of the American economy, and the iteration of democratic values through the market (Cohen, 2003). As we know, television was the primary conduit for mass consumption in postwar America. While television was linked to “progress,” and provided comfort and leisure, this technological innovation also challenged established patterns in home and community life (Spigel, 1992). Despite conflicted reactions to this medium, television penetration soared.<sup>19</sup> By the mid-to-late twentieth century, television had helped to naturalize the purportedly inherent value of a consumer identity. American citizens believed they could improve their lives, enhance the vitality of American democracy, and support the stability of the US economy by ensuring they received a “fair shake as consumers” (Cohen, 2003, p. 348).

Today, claims for belonging and inclusion in contemporary America tend to be grounded in a form of citizenship that hails the individualistic, rational consumer and secures the social position of consumption by presenting it as the best route to sovereignty, virtue, and personal achievement (Resnick & Wolff, 2003). Spurred on by broad trends toward globalization and postmodernization, citizenship studies arose in the social sciences and humanities to examine the conditions that allowed for “new claims to citizenship rights” (Isin & Turner, 2002,

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“through fueling aggregate demand in a mass consumption-dependent economy” (Cohen, 2003, p. 147).

<sup>19</sup> Between 1948 and 1955 two-thirds of homes in America adopted the technology. By the beginning of the sixties at least one receiver was present in close to 90 percent of homes, and the average American watched “approximately five hours of television each day” (Spigel, 1992, p. 1).

p. 1).<sup>20</sup> One urgent issue in the field of citizenship studies is the role that active citizens guided by a sense of community obligation play in the viability of democratic citizenship. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider the role virtues and obligations play in the iteration of contemporary American citizenship (Isin & Turner, 2002).

Consumer citizenship grounds personal autonomy in the training necessary for a citizen to attain a job within the labor market; this is vastly different from the classical Greek view of citizenship, which argues that personal autonomy occurs through “the education of the citizen in the virtues” (Isin & Turner, 2002, p. 7). In both cases, it is useful to consider the value placed on personal autonomy, as opposed to mutual interdependence. However, classical Greek citizenship is grounded in the role each complex, educated citizen plays in a vibrant civic society.<sup>21</sup> It is, in other words, a form of “thick” citizenship. Consumer citizenship is a “thin” form of citizenship that ignores the obligations that exist beyond the market (Isin & Turner, 2002). My research not only gives visibility to the primary role consumption has come to play in the performance of citizenship in contemporary America it also illustrates a notable shift in the articulation of consumer citizenship. Through my case analysis of the Bravo cable network, I trace

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<sup>20</sup> More specifically, in the 1990s the broad conditions of globalization and postmodernization and the concrete manifestations for these processes in areas like global and national capital accumulation, government regimes, identity politics and social movements compelled scholars to “rethink the political agent or subject under these transformations” (Isin & Turner, 2002, p. 1).

<sup>21</sup> The Classical Greek form of citizenship emphasized virtue and obligation, although it did so in a hierarchical political climate that severely limited access to citizenship, excluded women from “participation in the public sphere,” and was “dependent on a slave economy” (Turner, 2002, p. 271).

the shift from a television climate grounded in bourgeois consumer citizenship to a digital media landscape guided by nouveau riche consumer citizenship.

Consumption has played, and continues to play, a profound role in the discursive and material processes that sustain citizenship. Unfortunately, the form and content that citizenship claims take in contemporary America privilege market-based transactions that have “price tags,” can be “recorded,” and “leave trails” (Folbre, 2001). This works well at the individual level for those with the necessary discretionary income, but at what cost? Pursuing self-interests in the market without concern for moral sentiments, such as collective responsibility and altruism, obscures social inequality (Miller, 2007). Simultaneously, consumer citizenship supports the colonization of the political and the depoliticization of the public (Stavrakakis, 2003). A democratic life calls for commitment, skill, and willingness to contribute to and partake in collective well-being (Olbrys, 2006). In contrast, consumer citizenship tends to foster apathy, through a utopian vision that emphasizes the value of rational and responsible individuals who seek to maximize personal resources (Bryne & Healy, 2006). Apathy is a logical response to a neoliberal ethos “predicated on buying easy solutions to life’s many problems” (Olbrys, 2006, p. 1). Here we see how the absence of virtues and obligations supports discursive and material practices driven not by “virtuous citizens and effective and living institutions” (Isin & Turner, 2002, p. 8), but instead by self-interested individuals and private market-based institutions.

Two analytical frames for understanding modern civic life identified by Anna McCarthy (2007) help clarify the limitations of consumer citizenship at the



level of the nation state and the individual. The first analytical frame is grounded in self-governance and privatization. Here, the Foucauldian concept of governmentality gives visibility to the cultural and political economic limitations of the neoliberal nation state. Building off this, the second analytical frame engages the trauma brought about by “the failure of self-government,” within a self-annihilating and ineffable nation state (McCarthy, 2007, p. 21). The notion of trauma appropriately taps into the internal states of subjects, as well as the physical, emotional, and psychic pain brought about by disenfranchisement and socio-economic inequality. It aptly speaks to how “the actions of the hand affect the feelings of the heart” (Folbre, 2001, p. xiv).

The cultural production and reproduction of consumer citizenship has received increasing scholarly attention since the late twentieth century. Lauren Berlant (1997; 2008), Toby Miller (1998; 2007), Nestor Garcia Canclini (2001), Arlene Davila (2001), and Sara Banet –Weiser (1999; 2007) are some of the researchers who have contributed to this burgeoning field. A concern commonly highlighted is the tension that exists between political and consumer identity within a cultural climate oriented toward identity-based marketing and individualized niche consumption. How specific articulations of consumer citizenship engage, empower, and/or limit discursive and material reality for groups disenfranchised due to race, class, gender and age has received notable interest. The attention that Arlene Davila (2001) and Sara Banet –Weiser (2007) have lent to identity, branding and, consumer citizenship is of particular significance to this research.

Davila (2001) examines Hispanic marketing to unearth how individual Latinos are constituted as consumers and how the Latino population is constituted as a market. Following Toby Miller (1998), Davila engages the way technologies that support measurement and quantification are used to market and package minority populations. Given that ethnic marketing is politicized, even as it disciplines and contains ethnic consumers, a major concern that arises in her research is the contradiction between rhetoric and practice (Davila, 2001). Sara Banet –Weiser’s (2007) research on Nickelodeon highlights the role niche markets play in the articulation of consumer citizenship, and in cable branding. In alignment with Nestor Garcia Canclini (2001), Banet-Weiser engages the concept of an interpretive community. Nickelodeon’s brand culture serves as an interpretive community for audience members, and it offers belonging, political subjectivity, and a consumer identity for youth. The main limitation is that “citizenship is ultimately defined as a series of private acts, individualized as consumption practices” (Banet –Weiser, 2007, p. 213). Together, the research of Davila (2001) and Banet –Weiser (2007) gives visibility to the overdetermined nature of branding, commodification, and convergence in the digital media landscape. Davila’s (2001) research foregrounds the role that digital convergence has come to play in audience commodification, and how disenfranchised groups are marketed and packaged as a brand culture, while Banet –Weiser’s (2007) case analysis of Nickelodeon illustrates how citizenship is predetermined via a consumer brand that orients viewers toward commodification

Since the late twentieth century, disaggregated American consumers – who embrace a market mentality in relation to differences that exist between social groups – have sustained consumer citizenship’s cultural lineage. From education, labor, and consumption, to language and mass media, this market-driven form of citizenship subsumes the political by conflating consumer sovereignty and political sovereignty, while it displaces the economic component of citizenship by ignoring the need to redistribute capital gains (Miller, 2007). Consumer citizenship’s viability, at least in part, relies on the faulty presumption that a worker’s main goal is to increase his or her consumption of goods and services, as opposed to challenging and changing class structure (Resnick & Wolff, 2003). Efforts that drive workers “to excessively buy goods and services and accumulate consumable wealth” allow consumerism to function as the “glue” that holds US capitalism together (Wolff, 2010, p. 51).<sup>22</sup> Given television’s history as an advertising-driven medium that supported the development of consumer culture, we turn to the shift

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<sup>22</sup> I am basing my proposition on the work of Marxist economist Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff. They argue consumption has evolved into a complex hierarchical system that orients workers to move between “productive and unproductive jobs” (e.g. blue collar/white collar) based on the “qualities and quantities of consumption associated with each kind of work” (Resnick & Wolff, 2003, p. 213). This orientation evolved in the twentieth century as economists positioned labor as a burden that provided the economic means to consume, while commodity advertising arose as a “powerful tool to keep the mass obsession with consumption at fever pitch” (Resnick & Wolff, 2003, p. 216). Simultaneously, trade unions supported the rise of consumerism via their attention to a rising standard of living. In contrast, had trade unions challenged the organization of production, the ethos of consumerism may have wielded less power. By the final decades of the twentieth century consumerism had a significant material and discursive presence in contemporary American culture. Accordingly, flat wages since the 1970s did not stunt consumption. Instead, massive corporate profits were used to provide secured/unsecured debt for America workers. America workers were simultaneously being denied wage increases due to them, and paying interest to the very corporations – directly or indirectly – that were capitalizing on their increased productivity (Resnick & Wolff, 2003; Wolff, 2010).

from broadcasting to cable to develop a better understanding of the role TV has played in shaping the digital media landscape.

### **From the Network Era to the Democratic Promises of Niche Audiences**

Market power and commercial sponsorship are two central components of broadcast television's history in America that speak to the role this medium has played, and continues to play, in the "overarching institutional identity" of the digital media landscape (Schiller, 2000, p. 114). Initially, market power in the broadcast television industry was maintained via networking. Networking is a form of market power that relies on carriage agreements with local affiliates to ensure that the major broadcasters – which, during the network era, meant ABC, CBS and NBC – can reach a mass audience (Lotz, 2007a). Commercial sponsorship was the primary means used to generate profits in the network era. From the late 1950s on, advertisers bought time slots from individual broadcast stations and the major broadcast networks to air commercials (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill, 2005).<sup>23</sup> Initially, the aggregate size of the viewing audience determined the advertising rate. By the early 1960s the demographic characteristics of the audience were also incorporated into the price of the advertisement (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill, 2005). Broadcasters sold the potential viewing audience for a given program to advertisers before the program aired. Networking was of the utmost importance to commercial sponsorship because the practice increased

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<sup>23</sup> While at first one advertiser would sponsor a given broadcast program, in the late 1950s allegations of quiz show fraud and high production costs led to the development of commercial advertisements between programming (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill, 2005).

spatial reach and ensured simultaneous temporal airing via carriage agreements with local affiliates (Shimpach, 2010).

Cable television – or what was first known as “community antenna television” – was developed in the 1940s. Early on, cable technology extended the spatial reach of broadcast television via the retransmission of broadcast signals (Mullen, 2003). However, the growth of the cable industry in the final decades of the twentieth century occurred within a utopian discourse that positioned cable as a cure to the limitations of broadcast television. In alignment with cultural studies scholar Thomas Streeter (1997), I argue that the abstract language of cable as a “new technology” not only obscured the complex economic and historical conditions that supported its formation, but also positioned this technology as the route to “empower the currently powerless public” (p. 228). Streeter highlights the remarkable similarities in the emancipatory power afforded first to cable, and then to the Internet. In both instances, these new technologies offered “the solution” to the “limitations” of their technological ancestor. Historically entrenched social relations enabled discursive practices that systematically drew attention to the promise of flexibility, interactivity, and mass customization, thereby supporting the rise of the digital media landscape.

*Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting* offers insight into the important role niche audiences have played in the evolution of the cable industry. In the introduction to this anthology, Banet-Weiser, Chris, & Freitas note that they are interested in cable’s ability to “empower viewers as particular kinds of citizens,” attending to the way cable networks have been able to “cultivate a sense

of belonging” and “recognize audiences” (2007, pp. 8-9).<sup>24</sup> According to the editors, the primary questions engaged in the anthology are:

Does cable, with its loosened FCC controls on content and its move toward niche channels, reflect a public’s interest more accurately than broadcasting precisely because it is not bound by partisan regulatory policies? That is, how does cable’s largely for-profit structure impact its ability to serve the needs of the public as citizens as well as consumers and to serve us as members of both distinct niches and as members of a common society? (Banet-Weiser, Chris, & Freitas, 2007, p. 11)

Clearly, cable’s implementation of niche channels and niche programming recognized previously disenfranchised audiences, giving a voice to groups that were symbolically absent on broadcast television. In that sense, cable did – to some degree – reflect “public’s interest more accurately than broadcasting” (Banet-Weiser, Chris, & Freitas, 2007, p. 11). Still, the suggestion of causality requires attention. From my perspective, cable’s ability to reflect the public interest did not happen “precisely because” the cable industry was “not bound by partisan regulatory policies” (Banet-Weiser, Chris, & Freitas, 2007, p. 11).

On the one hand, limited content regulations in the cable industry created a climate more conducive to the needs of niche audiences. Cable networks needed to differentiate themselves from broadcast networks, and capitalizing on less stringent content regulations were an effective way for cable networks to assert their unique value. Regulation played a role in directing the attention of cable networks to niche audiences. On the other hand, had the move to niche interests

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<sup>24</sup> “Cultivating a sense of belonging” speaks to the central role channel design has played in creating the “something more” that cable channels offer (Banet-Weiser, Chris, & Freitas 2007, p. 9). While “recognizing audiences” speaks to the way cable channels have attended to groups “historically obscured by broadcast television” (Banet-Weiser, Chris, & Freitas, 2007, p. 9).

not been financially lucrative, for-profit cable providers and their potential shareholders – like owners and shareholders in all for-profit businesses – would have shifted to a practice that generated higher levels of capital accumulation.

As we know, that was not what happened. Instead, attention to niche audiences supported massive levels of growth and capital accumulation for the cable industry throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The cable industry's foray into niche channels, along with the industry's production and distribution of niche content, positioned it as a viable for-profit competitor that diminished broadcast television's viewers and profits. The commodification of niche content, along with industry and technological convergence, worked together to orient the digital media landscape writ large toward multiple technological platforms driven by mass customization.

Moreover, starting with HBO, brand management began to play a more pronounced role in dynamics between cable brands and consumer citizens. Scholars like Deborah Jaramillo (2002) and Amanda Lotz (2007b) have examined the presumptions surrounding taste, class, and quality that ground the HBO brand. Beyond HBO, research on Nickelodeon (Banet-Weiser, 2007); SyFy (Selznick, 2009); AMC (Smith, 2011); and Bravo/Showtime (Himberg, 2013) also offer insight into cable television and branding. What is most evident, if we reflect on this research in its entirety, is the notable change in the practice of television branding. John Thornton Caldwell's research demonstrates how television branding has progressed from an off-screen realm guided by advertising agency research and marketing personnel to "a self conscious form of promotional reflexivity" that

has shifted the visual and auditory elements commonly associated with television (2008, p. 246). For Bravo, this meant moving from an unknown noncommercial cable network grounded in highbrow arts programming, to a commercially oriented “super brand” that aptly exploited, and even shaped, the political economic, technological, and cultural processes of the digital media landscape. Still, this is not just about the commercial evolution of one cable network. On the contrary, my case analysis of Bravo exemplifies the role that brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence have come to play in the viability of postnetwork television writ large.

Today, the cable industry is interwoven within and across the media platforms utilized to create, produce, and distribute digital content, while the niche interests that supported cable’s phenomenal growth are an integral part of the digital media landscape. The “largely for-profit structure” of cable television can “serve us as members of both distinct niches and as members of a common society,” as indicated by the commercial success of cable networks like Bravo, A&E and Lifetime (Banet-Weiser, Chris, & Freitas, 2007, p. 11). In that vein, television is undoubtedly a source of symbolic power that brings pleasure and empowerment to various social communities. Simultaneously, the for-profit political economic landscape at best severely hinders, and at worst precludes, cable’s ability to serve “the needs of the public as citizens” (Banet-Weiser, Chris, & Freitas, 2007, p. 11). Here I am concerned with how consumption, citizenship, and technology innovation are discursively and materially situated within the digital media



landscape. For a deeper understanding of the digital media landscape's role in the iteration of consumer citizenship, we now turn to reality television.

### **Spectacle, Bodies, and Capital**

Foucault's (1995) attention to the role technology plays in the management of bodies and the generation of capital is integral to understanding the functioning of the digital media landscape. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, Foucault (1995) stresses the inseparability of how bodies and capital are accumulated. Today, the digital media landscape comprises various technological platforms capable of mass communication, situated within a cultural and political economic context that manages subjects virtually, thereby accumulating both bodies and capital. Still, the act of accumulating subjects requires a mode of production capable of utilizing and sustaining their bodies and minds. Disciplinary techniques cannot manage bodies and generate capital without large-scale individual buy-in, literally and figuratively.

During the second half of the twentieth century commodification, branding, and convergence slowly and methodically gave rise to a media landscape driven by brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence. My case analysis of Bravo in future chapters will give visibility to these shifts. Here, I want to reflect on how the presence of the commodity form has expanded since Guy Debord wrote his insightful critique of capitalism in the late 1960s. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/2012), Debord positioned commodification as the "dominant model of life" (1967/2012, p. 33). Debord spoke of the constant presence of the commodity as a spectacle. He argued the ubiquitous material

presence of the commodity form in day-to-day life, via the spheres of production and consumption, monopolized life. The content and form of the spectacle in the late 1960s had a natural status that justified and legitimized the goals and conditions of capitalism, according to Debord (1967/2012). It separated and alienated individuals, even as it presented itself as a means of unification. It claimed to speak for all, but it really only spoke on behalf of power (Debord, 1967/2012).

Debord made these claims before the rise of narrowcast cable networks, before the rise of digital capitalism, and before individuals had access to multiple technological platforms driven by brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence. I argue Debord's attention to the material and discursive power of commodification in our day-to-day lives takes on new meaning in the twenty-first century digital media landscape. Today, we find that commodification has not only expanded to places and practices that were previously seen through a different social logic – universality, citizenship, social participation and equality. It has also intensified via the creation of cybernetic commodities (Mosco, 2010).

On the one hand, the expansion of commodification into new realms of public space aligns well with the role branding has come to play in our day-to-day lives. The mid-1980s marked the point when management theorists pointed corporations toward the production of brands, as opposed to products (Klein, 2002). On the other hand, cybernetic commodification is reliant upon digital convergence. The late 1990s is the point in time when vertically integrated media

conglomerates began to readily exploit the power of digital convergence. Through practices like brand management and branded entertainment, the digital media landscape privileges the commodity form, while it also supports and exploits the process of cybernetic commodification via digital convergence.

Reality television is a specific type of entertainment content that epitomizes the nonstop discursive and material presence of the commodity form in the twenty-first century digital media landscape. The genre of reality television is an immensely popular form of commercial television that now constitutes a large portion of network and cable programming. While reality television can be traced back to the quiz show formats in the late 1950s, the beginning of 2000 was a formative point for this genre (Friedman, 2002).<sup>25</sup> The guise of “real life” this popular genre evokes naturalizes the representations and cultural discourses it disseminates. In the sub-sections that follow, I attend to two important themes that exemplify the role reality television plays in managing subjects and accumulating bodies in the digital media landscape.

### **Reality Television and the Value of Surveillance**

Depending on where you are situated in the digital media landscape, the value you attribute to surveillance looks different. From the perspective of industry executives, advertisers, and marketers, surveillance and monitoring are productive activities that generate capital accumulation. In contrast, reality television contestants appear to be less interested in the monetary rewards

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<sup>25</sup> The prevalence of reality television newspaper articles from January through September – over five hundred in major newspapers in the United States – and the hit show *Survivor*, which premiered that summer, mark the genre’s explosive impact in the digital media landscape in 2000 (Friedman, 2002).

associated with personal surveillance, and more interested in the self-growth they find through the life-changing experience (Andrejevic, 2004). Given the increasing numbers of people willing to serve as contestants, and the ubiquity and popularity of reality television, it is important to reflect on how this genre contributes to societal discourse surrounding the cultural legitimacy of surveillance. This is especially true, since the “convenience” and “value” afforded to personal disclosure in reality television helps to generate vast levels of capital accumulation across the multiple technological platforms that comprise the digital media landscape.

Until the mid-to-late twentieth century, surveillance evoked great concern. In particular, monitoring practices were viewed as an unnecessary intrusion on personal privacy. Despite this history, today we find surveillance glorified and naturalized in the genre of reality television. For example, reality television contestants frequently position “being watched all the time” as an activity that intensifies personal experiences and leads to “self-growth and self-knowledge” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 45). The presumption that the personal disclosure accessible as a reality contestant is an inherently valuable experience speaks to an important shift in the cultural acceptability of surveillance and monitoring. Relinquishing personal privacy is not the price contestants “pay” to gain access to public notoriety, fame, and monetary compensation. Quite the contrary, personal surveillance is an invaluable and genuine experience.

For a reality television contestant, surveillance offers a new type of “therapeutic ethos,” according to media studies scholar Mark Andrejevic (2004). In its initial formation the therapeutic ethos positioned consumption – via accredited

experts in the capitalist market – as a form of personal satisfaction for individuals unable to attain satisfaction through work (Jackson Lears, 1983). In its derivative form, it offers reality television contestants a “priceless” and “authentic” experience in an abstract and fragmented digital world, via surveillance and self-disclosure (Andrejevic, 2004). Yet in some cases being a reality television contestant offers the opportunity of both forms of the therapeutic ethos.

Specifically, Katherine Sender’s (2006) textual analysis in “Queens for a Day: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the Neoliberal Project” focuses on the role self-help experts play in helping to ensure job and relationship security for heterosexual male contestants that do not know how to consume. Here, not only are contestants offered authenticity in an abstract and fragmented digital world, they are also taught – via experts in the capitalist market – to utilize personal responsibility and consumer practices to improve the quality of their personal and professional lives. Moreover, in this example the therapeutic ethos moves beyond using consumption to placate worker dissatisfaction. Now, consumption practices are mobilized for “personal responsibility” to create better social and professional lives, thereby supporting the viability of consumer citizenship (Sender, 2006).

Today the therapeutic ethos is still grounded in the “thickets of the troubled self” where it originated (Jackson Lears, 1983, p. 37). Specifically, in a fragmented world characterized by an overwhelming array of visual and verbal clutter, reality television contestants turn to personal surveillance and lifestyle visibility for an “authentic” and “empowering” experience. Unfortunately, the glorification of personal surveillance characteristic of this genre generates a moral climate

conducive to technological monitoring, individual consumption, and personal responsibility, thereby sustaining the growth of digital capitalism.<sup>26</sup> The ethos of political sovereignty and democratic governance interwoven throughout reality television is of the utmost importance, and this is where we turn next.

### **Reality Television's Capitalist-Democracy**

Neoliberal discourse plays an important role in the seemingly democratic nature of individual consumer practices. As noted earlier, neoliberalism is grounded in the presumption that “contractual relations in the marketplace” should serve as a guide for human action (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). Situating the capitalist market as the measure of a healthy, well functioning democracy conflates consumer sovereignty and political sovereignty. The lack of differentiation between the practices of sovereign consumers and sovereign citizens is a theme that percolates through a great deal of reality television programming. The convergence of these two realms influences the role the marketplace plays in how we live, and whether and how we are accountable to others.

Self-branding, lifestyle responsibility, and philanthropy are three specific ways commodity consumption is navigated in reality television. The role consumption practices play in individual success,<sup>27</sup> the role personal responsibility plays in individual success,<sup>28</sup> and/or the role volunteerism and corporate

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<sup>26</sup> Digital capitalism – a seemingly “new” consumer medium driven by an integrated network system that provides easy and rapid access to images, voice, video and data – presents “consumer convenience” and “consumer choice” as the epitome of American democracy (Schiller, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> For example: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Sender, 2006; Miller, 2005) *Extreme Makeover* and *What Not to Wear* (Ouellette & Hay, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> For example: *Judge Judy* (Ouellette, 2004) and *Survivor* (Andrejevic, 2004)

benevolence should play in helping responsible individuals,<sup>29</sup> illustrate how self-branding, lifestyle responsibility, and philanthropy work to support the convergence of consumer sovereignty and political sovereignty in reality television. In each category mentioned above, the market is the solution to personal problems that seemingly have no grounding in cultural and political economic inequalities. In the world of reality television, philanthropy is an infrequent theme grounded in a personal choice to help a “deserving” individual (McMurria, 2008); alternatively, self-management and self-discipline reign in this genre. In that sense, a “citizen is now conceived as an individual whose most pressing obligation to society is to empower him or herself privately” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 3), via the processes of self-branding and lifestyle responsibility.

Market populism’s conflation of democratic governance and market-based consensus is another theme found in reality television programming. Market populism is a term that highlights the role markets play as mediums of consent in American society (Frank, 2000; Turow, 2008). Democratic governance relies on engaged, educated citizens who actively participate in vibrant civic society (Isin & Turner, 2002). Through political involvement at the local, state, and national levels citizens can express consent or dissent for the actions of government. The maxim “one-person, one vote” speaks to how fair treatment is grounded in “the logic of republic,” which assumes that equitable outcomes arise from public reason (Nerone, 2006, p. 103). In contrast, the dynamic growth in the marketplace is

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<sup>29</sup> For example: *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, *Three Wishes* and *Miracle Workers* (McMurria, 2008).

sustained by commerce logic grounded in the financial consensus of seemingly rational consumers. Individual consumption in the capitalist market forgoes collective responsibility and emphasizes pursuing self-interest via rational costs and benefits (Folbre, 2001). When democratic governance and the logic of commerce are conflated, the capitalist market moves beyond being seen as medium for exchange. Market populism confers the capitalist market with “democratic legitimacy” and presumes that it can articulate popular consensus more adequately than can democratic elections (Frank, 2000).

From accessing salacious content and voting for a favorite contestant, to customizing your phone or computer screen with programming extras, the commercial customization and interactivity accessible via the vast array of texts and platforms that span the reality genre are shrouded in market populism. For example, *Todd TV* – a reality program on FX – turned to its viewers “to help guide and shape a human subject named Todd” in 2004 (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). *Todd TV* viewers:

Watched video footage of the young man’s daily life and voted on the recommendations of professional experts brought into improve his image, attitudes, social life, finances and career trajectory. After considering the suggestions and strategies for Todd’s self – betterment presented during each episode’s Todd Town Hall segment, viewers telephoned or texted their decisions to the FX cable network. As a part of his television “contract with America,” the star agreed to abide by the results of the viewer poll and transform his life accordingly. (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 3)

The excerpt above highlights how democratic governance and the logic of commerce are conflated in a specific reality program. In this instance the show’s



star, Todd, conceded his freewill to the supposedly democratic reasoning of a commercial viewing audience.

The democratic power afforded to the genre of reality television can also be more nuanced. Most notably, the various social relations (e.g. interacting with other contestants on your favorite show's discussion board) and daily life practices (e.g. voting for contestants) engaged through this genre prioritize individual taste via mass customization and commercial interactivity. Mass customization is a class-based activity that "emerges as a paradigm only in markets in which consumers have both the leisure time and disposable income to assist in the production of customized products and to pay for the privilege of doing so" (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 84). Mass customization and technological interactivity support "one of the central goals of" digital capitalism, the "complete" convergence of consumption and entertainment (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 43). In that sense, it is not an accident that the "modes of consumption, production, and cultural practices" offered to facilitate interactivity coincide with the emergence of comprehensive and sophisticated technologies that can monitor consumer practices (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 8). Despite this, mass customization is conferred with democratic legitimacy, while consumer consensus – generated via the various texts and platforms that reality television span – is presumed to articulate popular will more adequately than democratic elections (Frank, 2000). As is evident, the fantasy of the American Dream, the unrealistic dream that fuses public and private fortune through political optimism (Berlant, 1997), is alive and well in reality television. Reality television content grounded in lifestyle interests (food, fashion, beauty,

design, and popular culture) well suited for consumption is a specific area of growth that requires attention.

### **Affluent Lifestyle Entertainment, Gender, and Consumer Citizenship**

Since the early twenty-first century, there has been a marked increase in reality programming driven by an “education in the consumer arts” (Palmer, 2008, p. 1). “Lifestyle programming” prioritizes individual practices in the market and uses images, stories, and themes from contemporary lifestyles to establish emotional connections with audiences worldwide. The obsessive focus on taste and personal responsibility in lifestyle programming erases the role class plays in structuring our discursive and material reality. Simultaneously, limitless consumer identities and the “never quite completed subject” is combined with an ironic critical distance to create a social, cultural, and political economic climate conducive to commodity acquisition (Palmer, 2008). Attention to lifestyle is not just about reality programming. Instead, I argue a new term is needed to situate a trend in gendered entertainment content across the digital media landscape.

In the two subsections that follow, I situate my argument regarding how television representations of gender have evolved in contemporary America. First, I attend to gender representations at two different points in television history to examine how patriarchy and capitalism are navigated, and to assess what this can tell us about the possibilities and limits of female subjectivity. Here, my analysis of the convergences and divergence between *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970-1977) and *Sex and the City* (1998 -2004) are used to give visibility to the shift from network TV’s “patriarchal capitalism” to postnetwork “capitalist patriarchy” in the digital media

landscape. Second, I put forward my conceptualization of affluent lifestyle entertainment and postfeminism. To historicize this new form of gendered programming, I examine scholarly research first on *Dynasty* – a cultural precursor to affluent lifestyle entertainment – and then on *Sex and the City*, the HBO series that marks a turn toward affluent lifestyle entertainment in the digital media landscape.

### **Television & Gender Representation**

Television representations of women in contemporary America have shifted a great deal since the mid-twentieth century. I am interested in the convergences and divergences between representations of women on television in the early 1970s and the late 1990s. A seminal text from each of these decades gives visibility to the possibilities and limits of female subjectivity. To set the context for my argument, I conceptualize patriarchy and capitalism in contemporary American culture, and put forward my understanding of the interrelationships between these two discursive and material entities. Next, I turn to scholarly discourse, first on *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970-1977), and then on *Sex and the City* (1998 -2004), to examine what the navigation of patriarchy and capitalism at these two points in time can tell us about the possibilities and limits of female subjectivity.

The legacy of patriarchy and capitalism that situates how we conceptualize consumption and citizenship, and how we perform as gendered citizens and consumers, is deeply interwoven in the discursive and material realities that characterize American society. Capitalism and patriarchy are two separate

discursive and material entities that shape subjectivity in contemporary American culture. Patriarchy is a social system that privileges male authority, whereas capitalism is a social system that privileges the authority of the “free market.” At the most simplistic level, the contestation of the former is about gender equality, while the contestation of the latter revolves around class equality. However, the discursive and material iteration of capitalism and patriarchy is not simple. To the contrary, capitalism and patriarchy are two intertwined discursive and material entities that support collective oppression across intersecting social identities (e.g. class, race, and gender). Together, capitalism and patriarchy constrain the parameters of female subjectivity.

The socially constructed “exchange value” of the male commodity in the public sphere as a worker, and the female commodity in the private sphere as a consumer, serves as one example of how capitalism and patriarchy are interconnected. The privileged role afforded to the male breadwinner does not mean women do not work. Instead, this masculine subtext “is confirmed by the vexed and strained nature of women’s relation to paid work in male-dominated capitalism” (Fraser, 1989, p. 124). Conversely, the privileged role afforded to the female consumer does not mean men do not shop. Instead, this feminine subtext is legitimated through the unpaid nature and underprivileged value associated with “women’s work” in the domestic realm (Fraser, 1989). Why does this matter? It matters because the neoliberal context that has prevailed since the late twentieth century is ill fitted to address the enduring discursive and material practices that sustain the distinction between the male public sphere and the female private

sphere. Power relations and gender hierarchy are not just about the family. To the contrary, these dynamics are replicated in a variety of cultural and political economic contexts (Dow, 1996).

Similarly, heteronormative social relations have played, and continue to play, an enduring role in the constitution of capitalism and patriarchy. For example, in the early decades of broadcast television the gendering of the audience commodity is evident in the industry view of women as “the normal, naturally occurring” audience for daytime programming (Meehan, 2002, p. 216). Alternatively, men serve as the highly prized prime-time audience. The structural contradictions in the “market for commodity ratings” during the network era presumed men control spending and wages, hence the central value afforded to the prime-time male viewer (Meehan, 2002). At this point in time, the television climate supported the iteration of “patriarchal capitalism” by privileging a “gendered subjectivity” grounded in selflessness, domesticity, and traditional family lifestyle. Today, the digital media landscape supports the iteration of “capitalist patriarchy.” This happens via the articulation of a “sexed subjectivity” characterized by self-pleasing, hyper-sexuality, and affluent lifestyle. In both instances, heteronormative notions of female duties, responsibilities, and roles are privileged, just in slightly different ways. The analysis of research on *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Sex and the City* that follows illustrates how the public/private sphere and gendered/sexed subjectivity were navigated in the shift from “patriarchal capitalism” of network television to the “capitalist patriarchy” of postnetwork television

From *I Love Lucy* (1951-1961) and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), to *The Donna Reed Show* (1958 -1966) and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, gendered subjectivity in the private sphere guided women's lives and experiences in postwar America. Accordingly, selflessness, domesticity, and traditional family lifestyle were of the utmost importance. The claim I am making in no way suggests women's unqualified acceptance of gendered subjectivity. To the contrary, the late 1960s marked the rise of second-wave feminism (Dow, 1996).<sup>30</sup> The first text under discussion, *Mary Tyler Moore*, was a response to a postwar cultural and political economic context grounded in patriarchal capitalism. When *Mary Tyler Moore* first aired in 1970, the increasing media coverage afforded to the women's liberation movement was supporting shifts in feminist discourse (Dow, 1996). Media and mediated representations were a primary area of focus for the women's movement. On the one hand, critiques addressed the lack of representation in entertainment and news programming. On the other hand, attention coalesced around the types of female representations (Gill, 2007).<sup>31</sup> How did *Mary Tyler Moore* challenge patriarchal capitalism within this cultural context?

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<sup>30</sup> Categories are often used to help understand the historical trajectory of the feminist movement. It is commonly agreed upon that "first-wave" feminism comprised the women's suffrage movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First-wave feminism ended in 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment granted women the right to vote. The start of second-wave feminism is marked by the political consciousness brought about in the late 1960s. First, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded in 1966. This was followed by grassroots organizing for women's liberation in 1967. Then in 1968, radical feminist implemented a highly visible protest of the Miss America contest in Atlantic City, NJ (Dow, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> For example, *The New York Times Magazine* published a study in 1972 that highlighted the role domesticity played in advertising representation of women. The study, which was conducted by the National Organization of Women (NOW), used "ordinary women" to assess and code over 1,200 commercials gathered during an eighteen-month time span (Gill, 2007).

Mary Richards, the main female character, was a single career woman. Her status as associate producer in the WJM-TV newsroom deviated from the stereotypical jobs (e.g. secretary) traditionally allocated to women in situation comedies (Dow, 1996). The uniqueness of *Mary Tyler Moore* came from the assertion “that work was not just a prelude to marriage, or a substitute for it, but could form the center of a satisfying life for a woman in the way it presumably did for men” (Dow, 1996, p. 24). From this perspective, *Mary Tyler Moore* disrupted patriarchal capitalism. Simultaneously, the show contained possibilities for change via workplace domestication. As noted by Dow (1996), *Mary Tyler Moore* transferred male authority and family relations from the home to the workplace. Mary was the caretaker for her “work family,” and her boss (Lou Grant) served as the patriarchal authority figure.

*Mary Tyler Moore* offered a commodified form of feminism that aligned well with liberal ideals. Liberal feminism supports women’s increased presence in the male dominated public sphere. Unfortunately, it ignores the role patriarchal power plays in women’s oppression across various contexts (Dow, 1996). Liberal feminism domesticated Mary Richards. At times, the show lent limited attention to plots concerning women’s liberation. Still, it did not address the systematic discursive and material inequalities of patriarchal relations. The most enduring theme was “the construction and protection of the *Mary Tyler Moore* family” (Dow, 1996, p. 40). The presence of a work family did not challenge gendered subjectivity. To the contrary, Mary’s role as a caretaker for her work family gave new life to gendered subjectivity in the public sphere. Nonetheless, within a

cultural and political economic climate oriented toward patriarchal capitalism, there was a rupture in television representations of women. *Mary Tyler Moore* offered the personal choice to engage in an augmented form of patriarchal capitalism. Selflessness, domesticity, and traditional family life found new presence in the public realm via the articulation of liberal feminism.

Women were offered a different set of choices in 1997 with the release of HBO's groundbreaking show *Sex and the City*. *Sex and the City* arose at a point in time when public discourse on feminism<sup>32</sup> was under attack. The media friendly feminism found in books<sup>33</sup> at this point in time privileged an empowerment mindset grounded in vigorous individualism (Dow, 1996). Feminism was being contested on various fronts, and mass mediated images of women relied on an ironic postmodern sensibility. In a cultural and political economic climate oriented toward capitalist patriarchy women were given the option to engage in self-pleasing, hyper-sexuality, and affluent lifestyle.

Like Mary Richards, the main female character in *Sex and the City* is a single career woman. While we know Carrie Bradshaw is a newspaper columnist, her work world is not the focus of the show. Instead, the private sphere subsumes the world of work (Arthurs, 2003). For three of the four main characters, work is easily collapsed into the private sphere. From Carrie's journalistic accounts of her

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<sup>32</sup> My use of the term feminism presumes a need for gender and sexual equality that addresses oppression across various intersecting social identities that are confined by the iteration of capitalism and patriarchy.

<sup>33</sup> For example: *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How it will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Wolf, 1993); *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women* (Sommers, 1994); and *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (Roiphe, 1993).



sex life and Samantha's reliance on personal charm and physical attractiveness to succeed in public relations, to Charlotte's role as the manager of an art gallery, work is just another form of self-expression that exists along side consumption (Arthurs, 2003).

The private lives of Carrie and her three friends is the primary focus of the show. These characters have jobs, but for the most part they are not vexed by contradictions brought by their choice to work.<sup>34</sup> Friendship in the private realm is privileged. The enduring bond between Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha subverts the value of the traditional nuclear family. Nevertheless, the female bonding conveyed in the show promotes a "strongly male identified notion of femininity" (Gill, 2007) grounded in enduring patriarchal values. Most notably, the discursive and material aspects of female bonding articulated in *Sex and the City* revolve around the characters' relationships with men, their interest in shopping, and their concerns tied to stereotypical feminine beauty ideals.

As is evident thus far, selflessness, domesticity, and traditional family lifestyle find limited presence in *Sex and the City*. Instead, heteronormative relations are grounded in sexed subjectivity. What does sexed subjectivity look like in *Sex and the City*? On the one hand, the series challenges preconceived ideas regarding what it means to be a "respectable woman" (Arthurs, 2003). Female characters are not castigated for being single and sexually active. To the contrary, *Sex and the City* privileges sexual pleasure and personal agency. On the other hand,

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<sup>34</sup> The contradiction between career success and private life for women is only evident in Miranda's efforts to balance being a lawyer and a mother following an unplanned pregnancy (Arthurs, 2003).

sexual pleasure and personal agency are navigated through a consumer oriented affluent lifestyle characterized by heteronormative ideals. Assertive sexual behavior exists alongside inordinate attention to fashion and style. Both sex and shopping are identity markers and spaces of pleasure (Arthurs, 2003).

Following an argument advanced by Rosalinda Gill (2006), I foreground the “new technologies of femininity” (p. 247) presented in late twentieth century media representations. *Sex and the City* epitomizes this new femininity via its privileging of the body, sexual practice, and consumerism. I argue this iconic show marked a turn toward a sexed subjectivity characterized by self-pleasing, hypersexuality, and affluent lifestyle. The shift from the liberal feminism found in *Mary Tyler Moore*, to the postfeminism found in *Sex and the City* interests me. But what is postfeminism? Moreover, how does postfeminism constrain female subjectivity?

Amanda Lotz (2006) links postfeminism with one specific subset of third-wave feminism.<sup>35</sup> Scholarly work from women of color in the 1980s and 1990s was central to the development of this form of postfeminism, according to Lotz.<sup>36</sup> This use of postfeminism presumes the need for multiple forms of feminism that adequately address the varying cultural, political economic, and technological contexts that shape women’s subjectivity. I fully support this goal, but this is not how I am using the term postfeminism. Instead, I find it more useful to refer to this as third-wave feminism. My use of postfeminism signifies discursive and material

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<sup>35</sup> The development of third-wave feminism in America was a response to the essentialist understanding of femininity that grounded second-wave feminism. Various strands of third-wave feminism arose to address the intersecting subjectivities (e.g. race, ethnicity, class, and nation) that influenced gender equality.

<sup>36</sup> This strand of third-wave feminism includes scholar like: bell hooks (1981); Angel Davis (1981); Patricia Hill Collins (1990); and Chela Sandoval (1990; 1991).

practices that incorporate a revised and depoliticized view of women's liberation grounded in the consumer market. Postfeminist texts caricature and distort the social and political goals of women's liberation. The capitalist patriarchy embedded in these texts sells a sexed subjectivity guided by self-pleasing, hypersexuality, and affluent lifestyle, that in my mind, is antithetical to the goal of third-wave feminism.

### **Postfeminism and Affluent Lifestyle Entertainment**

Identity politics play a central role in the discursive and material iteration of postfeminism. The term identity politics gives visibility to the central role that claims for recognition play within the neoliberal capitalist market. Postfeminist texts use identity politics to contain and domesticate women's liberation. Recognition claims grounded in the self-affirming and emancipatory nature of female consumption ignore how femininity is reified via a collective identity grounded in the seemingly natural status afforded to sexed subjectivity. In this environment, individuals are compelled to conform to specific identity groups, while creativity and cultural dissidence are discouraged and often linked to disloyalty. The result is a simplistic caricature of group identity that disregards multiple identifications, cross affiliations, and the complexity of human subjectivity (Fraser, 2009). Affluent lifestyle entertainment is a new form of gendered programming that supports the discursive and material iteration of postfeminism.

Affluent lifestyle entertainment is not genre specific, nor is it linked to any one specific medium or platform. The primary feature of affluent lifestyle entertainment is a conspicuous approach to lifestyle. I position "conspicuous

lifestyle” as a valuable aesthetic commodity grounded in image, appearance, and branding. “Conspicuous consumption” and “conspicuous production” are two specific ways conspicuous lifestyle is portrayed in affluent lifestyle entertainment. Conspicuous consumption refers to the role possessions play as visible signifiers for social status (Veblen, 1899) in this gendered entertainment content. More specifically, some forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment foreground consumer lifestyle via the conspicuous consumption of economically privileged characters. Docudramas like *The Real Housewives* (Bravo), *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!), and *Basketball Wives* (VH1) serve as notable examples. Conspicuous production refers to the industrial manufacturing of celebrities in this gendered entertainment content. In this instance, prominent visibility is afforded to characters seeking a status-oriented celebrity lifestyle. Career-based reality television is a perfect example (e.g. Bravo’s *Top Chef*). Of course, this form of affluent lifestyle entertainment offers the opportunity to achieve success in a specific professional realm. Still, it cannot be ignored that these shows serve as a gateway to celebrity status for a chosen few. For this reason, I argue career-based reality TV manufactures and displays visible and status-oriented careers in fashion, food, beauty, design, and popular culture via the process of conspicuous production.

Whether the backdrop is consumption, production, or some combination of the two, conspicuous lifestyle always maintains an enduring presence. The conspicuous lifestyle embedded in this content serves as a perpetual advertisement for social relations guided by commodification, thereby supporting

the goals of nouveau riche consumer citizenship. This depoliticized form of citizenship celebrates the neoliberal ideals of personal choice and self-governance; glorifies consumption and production in the capitalist market; and encourages aspirational consumption across various lifestyle realms (e.g. food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture).

Another essential component of affluent lifestyle entertainment is irony. Following cultural studies scholar Linda Hutcheon (1994), I situate irony as a complex discursive strategy.<sup>37</sup> Irony happens because “discursive communities already exist and provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony” (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 18). The ironic scenes found in affluent lifestyle entertainment exploit the intersecting tensions amongst various discursive communities (gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class). To do this, socially agreed upon hierarchies are called into being, and this matter for at least two reasons.

First, capitalist patriarchy is an oppressive force with real and symbolic power. The sheer presence of sexed-subjectivity in affluent lifestyle entertainment supports the discursive and material iteration of capitalist patriarchy at the macro level. Second, interpreting an ironic scene requires “rapid perceptual or hermeneutic movement” (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 60) between literal meaning (the said) and ironic meaning (the unsaid). Here we see how laughing at the excess in affluent lifestyle entertainment can never simply equal an outright rejection of

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<sup>37</sup> This means irony does not simplistically fit into a binary relationship between literal content (what is said) on the one hand, and the ironic intention (what goes on said) on the other (Hutcheon, 1994).

capitalist patriarchy. Pure subversion assumes a simplistic rejection/substitution theory of irony grounded in semantic inversion. This perspective does not engage how irony functions as a complex discursive strategy (Hutcheon, 1994).

The irony in a show like *Sex and the City* capitalizes on the entrenched nature of capitalist patriarchy in contemporary American culture. Does laughing at the excess of capitalist patriarchy help? Possibly, but this is an incomplete question as it only considers ironic intent. The more appropriate question: why do female viewers laugh at the ironic meaning while simultaneously literally or figuratively buying into the literal meaning? This happens because irony is an aesthetic commodity that effectively navigates subversion and complicity. Irony is a space of ambivalence. As a scholar, I fully embrace Linda Hutcheon's claim that "it is too easy to forget the dangers in the face of the valorization of irony's subversive potential" (1994, p. 204).

### **From *Dynasty* to *Sex and the City***

Affluent lifestyle entertainment is not entirely new. In fact, signs of this content can be seen in 1980s television programming. The television show *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989) is a salient precursor to *Sex and the City* that was analyzed by Jostein Gripsrud (1995) in *The Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies*. Gripsrud's multifaceted investigation of *Dynasty* situates the prime time soap opera in the media landscape, American society, and Norwegian society. The hour-long serial melodrama was the second "prime time soap opera" to air on network television in the 1980s. As with its predecessor *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991), *Dynasty* combined the themes and narrative form of the daytime soap opera with

“traditionally male-oriented themes and motifs” (Gripsrud, 1995, p. 50). Both *Dallas* and *Dynasty* were grounded in extravagant wealth, opulent costumes/sets, and outrageous plotlines. The excessive melodrama brought irony and camp sensibilities to prime-time television (Gripsrud, 1995).

*Dynasty* stands out within its historical context due to the fantasy and fashion that permeated the show’s marketing. The fantasy it presented was grounded in a luxury image. Accordingly, marketing materials were expected “to look like ‘fashion spreads,’ and in production stills no character would ever wear causal, everyday clothes” (Gripsrud, 1995, p. 64). Merchandising and licensing also played a key role in *Dynasty*’s mark on American popular culture. By 1984, only four years after the show premiered in America, *Dynasty* had a plethora of merchandising deals and was airing in sixty-four countries. Merchandising spanned jewelry, clothing, luggage, linens, optical wear, and home furnishing. While the initial focus was on high-end boutiques and posh retailers like Bloomingdale’s, high cost items were taken off the market in 1986. Ultimately, only “the less expensive products, such as perfumes, were financial successes for their manufactures, at least in the domestic market” (Gripsrud, 1995, p. 66).

If we compare and contrast *Sex and the City* (*SATC*) and *Dynasty* we are able to see how sameness and difference are navigated in the television production of these two shows. On the one hand, like *Dynasty*, *SATC*’s aesthetic sensibilities are grounded in affluence, glamour, gloss, fashion, and irony. Similarly, both are recombinant forms that integrate elements of different television genres. *SATC* combines dramatic television and the situation comedy, whereas *Dynasty* pairs

male-oriented themes with the daytime soap opera format (Gripsrud, 1995). On the other hand, unlike *Dynasty*, *SATC* privileges female relationships and themes in a half-hour show aired on a premium cable network.

A final similarity is the attention to marketing in both shows. *SATC*'s conspicuous approach to branding is a salient feature of affluent lifestyle entertainment that evokes, and moves far beyond, the attention to marketing found in *Dynasty*. While *Dynasty* had some merchandising success, *SATC* purportedly served as a calling card for high-end brands like Manolo Blahnik, Fendi, Gucci, Hermes, Bulgari, Moschino, Chanel, Prada, Dior, and Versace (Akass & McCabe, 2004, p. 6). In its original run on HBO, this iconic text offered female viewers an "integrated lifestyle" to emulate via an array of paratexts across multiple technological platforms (Arthurs, 2003). *SATC*'s well-integrated branded entertainment spanned the realms of food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture. In particular, the show has had a significant impact on the fashion industry.

Starting with the show's producer, Darren Star, we can see the important role women and fashion played in the planning of *SATC*. Star prioritized fashion from the start. The producer credits his experience writing for *Beverly Hills 90210* for teaching him that women watch "shows for clothes as much as the story" (Sohn, 2004, p. 62). Costume designer Patricia Field brought Star's desire to prioritize fashion to life. Field's formula, "an equidistant triangle," in which "one point of the triangle is the actor, another is the character, and the third is the wardrobe" (Sohn, 2004, p. 63). Star's vision, and Field's conceptualization and



implementation of that vision, speak to the important contributions the creative minds behind *SATC* played in the show's attention to fashion. HBO, *SATC*'s distributor, also played an important role in the show's attention to "quality" branded entertainment:

It is no small coincidence that *SATC*, with its compulsive obsession for designer labels, is the product of a cable channel preoccupied with promoting a "quality" brand identity for itself. The series gives added meaning to the HBO slogan – "It's Not TV. It's HBO" – with its celebratory fashion and exclusive designer shoes as well as the "in" places to eat and be seen in Manhattan. Vicarious consumption and desirable lifestyles are built into the series formula. (Akass & McCabe, 2004, p. 6)

As evident in the preceding quote, access to and celebratory promotion of fashion, design, and food aligned with the brand identity for *SATC* and HBO. From Darren Star and costume designer Patricia Field, to HBO's "quality brand identity," we can see the important role fashion and lifestyle played in how HBO's hit series *SATC* was imagined, conceptualized, and branded by mid-level entertainment executives.

Branding is of the utmost importance in the twenty-first century digital media landscape. *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence* (2012), a book written by media scholar Sara Banet Weiser, attends to the salient role brand cultures play in our day-to-day lives. For Banet Weiser (2012), the term brand culture speaks to the dynamic relations amongst products, consumers, and the marketing environment. We are immersed in a staggering number of brand cultures as we engage in our day-to-day activities in the digital media landscape. Building off Weiser (2012), I rely on brand management to highlight the role industry

production and structural constraints play in the interpenetrating interactions amongst any given product, its consumers, and its marketing environment.

The *SATC* website exemplifies the role fashion and lifestyle played in the brand management of this gendered franchise. In particular, “The Look” section on the show’s website offered pictures and descriptions of fashions worn by the four main stars (HBO). Attention to designer fashion and lifestyle can also be seen in entertainment/news coverage, another type of paratext that situated the *SATC* brand. Both print and electronic media frequently noted *SATC*’s influence on women’s fashion. From clothing, to handbags and shoes, the designer fashions the four lead characters carried and wore often became “must have” items, and at times generated a “fashion stampede” (Akass & McCabe, 2004, p. 11).

Ultimately the branded entertainment in *SATC*, and the brand management surrounding the series, served as “high profile, value added marketing” (Koing, 2004, p. 138). In fact, according to scholar Anna König, *SATC* served as “a far better showcase than any number of catwalk shows or advertising campaigns” for the fashion industry (König, 2004, p. 138). It is also important to highlight the formative role fashion writing plays in supporting consumer culture and the economic imperatives of the fashion industry. Broadly speaking, fashion writing tends to be “informative or celebratory” (McRobbie, 1998) At times, fashion writing is “mildly ironic;” still “it is never critical,” as journalists and editors are unlikely to “break ranks and produce more engaged and challenging writing on the subject” (McRobbie, 1998, p. 173). In that vein, fashion writing touting the new levels of financial success/industry acclaim for the designers who provided

wardrobe for the four female leads supported, sustained, and fed into *SATC*'s iconic status as a programming outlet for fashion. Moreover, the dialectical relations between *SATC* and the fashion industry served as an effective way to market and sell designer clothing to a gendered audience.

Given the dual attention to branding and irony in the twenty-first century, the success of affluent lifestyle entertainment makes sense. On the one hand, the relationship between products, consumers, and marketers – what Banet-Weiser (2012) referred to as brand culture – “have increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships” (p. 4). Today, self-branding is situated as the “proper” way to care for oneself. While the Internet has allowed individuals to apply brand management strategies to their personal and professional lives in creative new ways, visibility comes at a cost, as self-branding is one way postfeminism is rearticulated materially and discursively in the digital media landscape. Most notably, individual entrepreneurship – grounded in stifling heterosexual ideals tied to beauty and sexuality that require significant consumption – is situated as empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This form of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship is grounded in a monolithic ideal that tends to reify White gendered heterosexual wealth.

On the other hand, we live in a culture in which authenticity is at a premium, and self-branding purportedly serves as a primary route to authentic engagement in the digital media landscape. The irony in affluent lifestyle entertainment capitalizes on the presumed value of authenticity. “Ironic meaning” allows for the possibility that viewers will laugh at the excessive representation of

capitalist patriarchy. The authenticity comes from being in on the joke. Even if we assume the optimal scenario (the viewer laughed at the excessive representation of capitalist patriarchy), the “literal content” still has power. Indeed, affluent lifestyle is so effective because viewers are able to laugh at the “ironic meaning” and literally or figuratively buy into the “literal meaning.” Capitalist patriarchy offers the individual “choice” of personal pleasure, hyper-sexuality, and affluent lifestyle. Of course, the presumption is that now all women can make their own individual choices. Choice is disconnected from the political struggles that have supported collective social change in the realms of race, class, and gender and placed in the individual realm via irony.

Ultimately, the inordinate role capitalist patriarchy “literally” plays in affluent lifestyle entertainment matters. For example, Rosalind Gill’s 2007 commentary on *Sex and the City* noted how consumption was “far too important to the show to be treated satirically” (p. 247). I agree with Gill, and I am interested in how *Sex and the City* marks a turn toward affluent lifestyle entertainment in the digital media landscape. As we will see in future chapters, technological innovation has a profound impact on the tensions amongst the industry, texts, and viewers that constitute the digital media landscape. Specifically, as new forms of technology develop, changes inevitably occur in how content is produced and distributed, and how viewers engage with and experience content. For example, Mari Castañeda (2011) notes the way in which Spanish-language telenovelas are being transformed as digital convergence shifts the relations between viewers and content. Telenovelas offer new possibilities for consumers, as they create

communities via an array of paratexts that both challenge and reinforce the status quo (Castañeda, 2011). Still, Castañeda's (2011) analysis highlights how the production and distribution of this genre aligns with expectations tied to branding, commodification, and convergence in a post-network digital media landscape driven by niche audiences.

### **Conclusion**

The signature reality programming provided by Bravo in the twenty-first century is representative of a pattern in gendered entertainment content. Affluent lifestyle entertainment spans various genres, mediums, and platforms. Not all forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment have the same reach. Still, there are many parallels between *Sex and the City*, *Project Runway*, and *The Real Housewives*. Most notably, all of these transmedia franchises have a ubiquitous status in popular culture due to their successful navigation of brand management. From merchandising and spin-offs, to customized digital content and viewer engagement via multiple technological platforms, these three shows are representative of important cultural, technological, and political economic shifts in the digital media landscape.

As Bravo has perfected the characteristics of affluent lifestyle entertainment, and effectively engaged their female audience commodity before, during, and after the airing of their original programming, other niche female cable networks have started to replicate Bravo's affluent lifestyle entertainment. From Lifetime<sup>38</sup> and Style,<sup>39</sup> to E!,<sup>40</sup> and Oxygen,<sup>41</sup> cable channels with an affinity toward

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<sup>38</sup> For example: *Project Runway*, *Designing Spaces* and *Russian Dolls*.

the female audience commodity are increasingly turning to affluent lifestyle entertainment. This gendered form of program content supports the discursive and material iteration of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship in the twenty-first century digital media landscape.

Ultimately, I argue affluent lifestyle entertainment is a form of “integrated spectacle” (Debord, 1988) that illustrates how branding, commodification, and convergence have evolved into brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence. As we will see, the seemingly infinite array of supposed differences in the media landscape have supported the growth and development of the spectacle (Debord, 1988). Affluent lifestyle entertainment is a gendered form of entertainment content that embodies integrated spectacle due to its: (1) concentrated presence across various interconnected texts, platforms, mediums, and industries; (2) reliance on brand management to engage viewers as producers and consumers; and (3) ability to generate valuable cybernetic commodities.

Bravo’s evolution speaks to the central role commodification, convergence, and branding – situated within a neoliberal cultural, political economic, and technological climate – have played in the viability of niche cable networks, as well as how consumer citizenship has been articulated and rearticulated over thirty years. The individualistic form of consumer citizenship espoused foregrounds the

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<sup>39</sup> For example: *Giuliana and Bill*, *Jerseylicious* and *Big Rich Texas*.

<sup>40</sup> For example: *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, *Bridal Plasty* and *Married to Rock*.

<sup>41</sup> For example: *The World According to Paris*, *Dance You’re A\*\* Off*, *Hair Battle Spectacular* and *Love Games*.

rational consumer and maintains the illusion of the American Dream via neoliberal discourse that positions belonging and inclusion as market-based needs that can be met via consumption (Miller, 2007). In the 1980s and 1990s that meant bourgeois respectability and cultural capital; in the 2000s it meant affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption. Over this thirty-year span of time consumer citizenship was not a monolithic entity that was consistently situated in one way. Instead, the slow and methodical naturalization and confluence of brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence gave rise to nouveau riche consumer citizenship.

Unfortunately, today we are inundated with a vast array of interconnected texts, platforms, and industries that effectively manage and extend iconic brands in a cultural, political economic, and technological climate driven by digital capitalism. In the chapters that follow I trace the role branding, convergence, and commodification played in Bravo's transition from a highbrow arts network driven by cultural capital to an affluent lifestyle network driven by conspicuous consumption. Bravo's historical trajectory is a case example that gives life to the role consumer citizenship has played in the media landscape for three decades.

## CHAPTER 3

### HISTORICIZING BRAVO

In 1988 Bravo's parent company Cablevision made headlines in *The New York Times* when it announced two impending deals with media conglomerate Viacom. Cablevision planned to pay \$550 million to purchase Viacom's Long Island and Cleveland cable operations.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the Long Island cable operator would purchase "a 5 percent stake" in The Movie Channel and Showtime from Viacom for \$25 million (Fabrikant, 1989, p. 1). The aforementioned transactions between Cablevision and Viacom are representative of the mergers and acquisitions that took place in the cable industry in the late 1980s, and they situate Bravo within a parent company and media landscape undergoing formative political economic change.<sup>43</sup> In the final decades of the twentieth century, the economic concentration of the cable industry dramatically increased as the cable operators were freed from regulations that had limited their growth (Schiller, 2000). Industry convergence was a common result of the market ethos that guided the FCC's regulatory decisions in the 1980s.<sup>44</sup> Yet, how was Bravo – a "premium"<sup>45</sup> cable network founded in 1980 – situated within this political economic context?

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<sup>42</sup> When the acquisition was complete Cablevision would be amongst the 10 largest cable providers nationwide, with 1.3 million subscribers (Fabrikant, 1988).

<sup>43</sup> The array of transaction that took place in the 1980s left the leading cable industry survivors with "staggering debt loads" (Schiller, 2000, p. 108). For example, in 1988 Cablevision paid \$22.6 million for interest on its debt, in the same year the company had \$493 million in sales (*Cablevision Systems*, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> The FCC's 1985 relaxation of cross ownership regulations allowed one media entity to own a maximum of 36 stations nationwide – 12 broadcast television, 12 AM radio, and 12 FM radio – as long as each set of twelve stations did not reach over 25% of American homes. Simultaneously the FCC's elimination of a 3 year anti-trafficking regulation that prohibited the quick sale of television



If we contrast Bravo with “premium” services like HBO and Showtime or “basic” cable networks like MTV, VH1, and Nickelodeon, we find that the highbrow arts programmer lacked national recognition (Fabrikant, 1989). For example, when Cablevision expanded its cable services to Washington D.C. in 1988, a prospective customer interested in subscribing to Bravo encountered stumbling blocks when employees in the D.C. Cablevision office could not explain “what Bravo was” (Bruske, 1988, p. 1). The customer was routed from the Colorado publisher that listed Bravo in its cable program guide to Bravo’s production headquarters in New York in an effort to learn about the niche cable network (Bruske, 1988). This story, which was noted in *The Washington Post*, highlights Bravo’s national anonymity in the 1980s. Still, the niche cultural arts network was a well-known regional entity that received consistent coverage in *The New York Times*. In fact, *New York Times* journalist John O’Conner situated Bravo as a valuable outlet for highbrow arts programming that was tailor made for a Manhattan audience (O’Conner, 1986).

The two examples above typify Bravo’s societal recognition as a cable network in the decade under analysis. My analysis of the cultural, political economic, and technological processes that shaped Bravo’s trajectory in the 1980s highlights how mid-level industry discourse and practices constituted Bravo in the decade under analysis. Through the field of production studies, I trace Bravo’s rise

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stations allowed for the quick and easy sale of these commodities at the local and national level (Shimpach, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Premium cable networks rely solely on subscriber fees, whereas “basic” cable networks rely on subscription and advertising revenue (Lotz, 2007a).

as a cable network that provided bourgeois consumer citizens with highbrow arts programming.<sup>46</sup> Bravo serves as a case study that exemplifies the shift from network to post-network TV underway in the 1980s media landscape.

First, it is important to note the challenges analyzing Bravo in the 1980s presented. During this decade there was limited newspaper and trade journal coverage of Bravo. Nonetheless, what is present and what is absent in this decade has important value for Bravo's shifting status in the media landscape over three decades. On the one hand, the depth of coverage in *The New York Times* makes sense given Cablevision's Long Island roots. Both Bravo and its parent company Cablevision are regional entities with limited reach beyond the east coast in the 1980s. On the other hand, the absence of coverage across different newspapers and trade journals suggests Bravo's national obscurity. Still, this makes sense given that the 1980s was the beginning point for "two decades of gradual change" across the industries and technologies that comprise the media landscape (Lotz, 2007a, p. 12). The absence of articles in the available historical archive, at least in part, can be attributed to the cultural and political economic context. In fact, as cable technology (1990s) and Bravo (2000s) become ubiquitous entities in the political economic structure and cultural ethos of the television industry, we find a dramatic increase in the amount and type of coverage afforded to both.

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<sup>46</sup> Derived from the comprehensive historical archive I compiled, highbrow arts programming is a term that encapsulated cultural discourse surrounding content offered on cable networks like Bravo, A&E, the History Channel, Discovery, Showtime, and HBO. From independent films and foreign films, to documentaries and performance art, highbrow arts programming referred to creative content that purportedly had "substance" and was devoid of, or had limited commercial imperatives.

Industry convergence, branding, and commodification are three themes that permeate the historical trajectory of Bravo specifically, and the cable industry writ large in the 1980s. First, Bravo's parent company Cablevision offers insight into the role industry convergence played in the evolution of niche cable networks in the 1980s. Parent company Cablevision merged with various entertainment entities (e.g. cable operators, cable programmers, and broadcast networks) in this decade. Most notably, industry convergence between Cablevision – Bravo's parent company – and NBC was the first step in a long journey that culminated with NBC's full acquisition of Bravo in the early twenty-first century.

Second, class and taste played an instrumental role in Bravo's brand identity. Bravo, HBO, Showtime, and A&E are four niche cable networks that capitalized on highbrow arts programming to varying degrees in the 1980s. All of these networks relied on the cultural capital associated with cable technology, niche audiences, and bourgeois content to substantiate the value of their brand identity. Bravo in particular acquired a well-recognized status in New York for its bourgeois content. As we will see, this small cable network ending up surpassing PBS as an outlet for highbrow arts programming. Why did this happen? I argue it happened due to the new role technology played in access to "quality" programming. Bravo is important because it marks the move beyond the paternalistic universal standards of PBS. Bravo embodies the neoliberal ideals of self-governance and privatization taking hold in American culture. At this point in time, taste for specialized technology and highbrow arts programming were both important components of bourgeois consumer citizenship.

Finally, Bravo started its lifespan as a premium cable network that did not air commercials; then, at the end of the decade Bravo transitioned to basic cable. This notable change speaks to the third theme, commodification. Bravo's decision to move to basic cable came with a new reliance on advertising. Like other cable networks at this point in time, Bravo capitalized on the increasing value basic cable had with prospective advertisers interested in targeting a niche audience. Together, industry convergence, branding, and commodification are three themes interwoven through the bourgeois consumer citizenship that characterized the 1980s television landscape. The next section historicizes the regulatory climate, industry structure, and programming precedents that supported Bravo's founding in 1980.

### **Contextualizing the Cable Industry**

Cable technology initially extended the reach of broadcast networks through community antennas that collected broadcast signals and subsequently transmitted these signals to individual homes via cable wires. The shift from the term community antenna TV (CATV) to cable television in 1968 occurred at the start of the Blue Sky era (1968-1975). The Blue Sky era provided the foundation for the modern cable landscape. During this time, cable was offered up as a revolutionary technology that could remedy the failures of broadcast television (Streeter, 1997). Sterling Manhattan – a venture that spanned the Blue Sky era – was the first cable enterprise initiated by Bravo's founder Charles Dolan. Here, I highlight the role highbrow arts programming and industry convergence played in

the embodiment of Sterling Manhattan, and examine how this Blue Sky era venture served as a cultural and political economic precursor for the Bravo cable network.

First, Bravo's programming orientation is embedded in the privileged space afforded to the airing of the highbrow arts on television. During the Blue Sky era, bourgeois values that perpetuated a rigid distinction between highbrow and lowbrow content were integral to cable programming in New York, and across the nation (Mullen, 2003). Television had "become the most important instrument for the passage of culture from one generation to another" and there was great anxiety surrounding the perils of mass culture (Price, 1975, p. 546). In fact, it was believed that the tentacles of the big three broadcast networks – ABC, CBS, and NBC – disseminated homogenized commercial content across the nation that was stifling pluralism and localism. Sterling Manhattan's local cable programming advocated the cultural sentiments of the Blue Sky era (Mullen, 2003). The New York amendment<sup>47</sup> that guided Sterling Manhattan called for cable programming with artistic value. Moreover, it prohibited commercials and the airing of motion pictures that solely served as a source of entertainment. When Bravo was founded in 1980, its brand identity showed the mark of the Blue Sky era. Like Sterling Manhattan, the Bravo cable network sought to strengthen participatory democracy via quality programming that did not pander to commercial imperatives.

Time Inc. is the well-situated media conglomerate that co-owned Sterling Manhattan with Charles Dolan, and this partnership led to the founding of HBO in

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<sup>47</sup> According to Mullen, cable programming purportedly served as a viable route to cultural democracy and the lower Manhattan amendment set important restrictions on content that were in alignment with the cultural values that "were sweeping the nation" (2003, p. 84).

November 1971 (Mullen, 2003). Both of Dolan's ventures – Sterling Manhattan and Bravo – illustrate the second theme, the role industry convergence played in the early formation of the cable industry. Dolan's partnership with Time Inc. ended only two years after the founding of HBO. In 1973, Sterling Manhattan's multiple debts led Time Inc. to divest Sterling Manhattan's costly cable franchises and acquire full ownership of HBO. Still believing in the viability of providing cable services to New York residents, Dolan reacquired the Sterling Manhattan cable franchises Time liquidated, and subsequently founded Cablevision ("Cablevision Systems Corporation," 2010).<sup>48</sup>

Like its predecessor Sterling Manhattan, Cablevision was initially inhibited by the capital investment needed in the cable business, and Dolan sought various investors to sustain and expand Cablevision throughout the 1970s. By 1980 Cablevision was worth \$250 million and had 155,000 customers, with a cash flow and debt valued at \$14 million and \$45 million respectively. With infrastructure expanding (Cablevision owned fifty miles of cable infrastructure in 1973 and seven years later it owned 4,000 miles), Rainbow Programming Services was formed in 1980 ("Cablevision Systems Corporation," 2010).

Rainbow Programming Services was founded to create and distribute cable programming, and the Cablevision subsidiary launched Bravo and American Movie Classics (AMC).<sup>49</sup> Throughout the 1980s, Cablevision expanded its cable

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<sup>48</sup> Dolan received \$675,000 for the sale of his Sterling Manhattan stock. He used a portion of this money for the cable franchises ("Cablevision Systems Corporation," 2010).

<sup>49</sup> AMC is a niche channel for vintage Hollywood films and Bravo is a niche channel for performing arts and fringe films (Battaglio, 1989).

franchises,<sup>50</sup> became a publically held company,<sup>51</sup> invested in other cable entities, and engaged in joint ventures<sup>52</sup> (“Cablevision Systems Corporation,” 2010). In particular, Cablevision’s 1989 joint programming venture with NBC is an example of industry convergence that linked the Long Island based cable provider with a transnational media conglomerate. The 1989 partnership involved pay-per-view coverage of the impending 1992 Olympics, regional cable stations for sports and news, as well as a national cable network. According to the *International Directory of Company Histories*:

NBC received a 50 percent stake in most of Rainbow’s programming services, while Cablevision took 50 percent of NBC’s cable venture, Consumer News and Business Channel, and \$137.5 million to develop programming for it. The two companies also intended to create a series of regional cable news stations and 10 sports channels in addition to the 5 already operated by Cablevision. (“Cablevision System Corporation,” 2010)

The 1989 Cablevision and NBC joint partnership – which gave NBC 50% ownership in Rainbow Programming Services – marked the first time NBC had a financial stake in the Bravo cable network (“Cablevision Systems Corporation,” 2010).

By the late 1980s, cable technology – a technology initially used to extend the reach of broadcast networks – was becoming embedded in the market power

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<sup>50</sup> For example, in 1984 Cablevision expanded services in New York – portions of the Bronx and Brooklyn – and acquired a new franchise in Boston. At this point in time Cablevision has 595,000 subscribers and is the 15<sup>th</sup> largest cable provider in America (“Cablevision Systems Corporation,” 2010).

<sup>51</sup> In 1986 Cablevision became a publicly held company. The stock structure allowed Dolan to maintain a significant portion of voting rights and “control of 75 percent of the board of directors” (“Cablevision Systems Corporation,” 2010, p. 3).

<sup>52</sup> For example in 1987 Cablevision invested in Turner Broadcasting Systems Inc. (TBS) through a \$550 million group acquisition with other cable operators (“Cablevision Systems Corporation,” 2010).

and commercial sponsorship that guided the formation of broadcast television. The policies implemented from 1968 through 1975 supported this shift. When these policies were out in place they were seen as the answer to local needs and minority interests unaddressed by broadcast television. Nonetheless, government leniency toward big business – grounded in a neoliberal economic perspective that touted the democratic potential of the free market – had the opposite effect (Mullen, 2003).<sup>53</sup> Industry convergence and commercialism did not dominate the cable industry in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, convergence slowly became a more common practice. Industry convergence between the broadcast and cable industries led to the slow and methodical dominance of traditional advertising in basic cable. As a case in point, when Bravo was founded as a commercial free highbrow arts programmer in 1980 it fully embraced the cultural programming hierarchy that characterized the Blue Sky era. Over the next two decades, as Bravo becomes more embedded in commodification and convergence, the commercial interests of advertisers and transnational media conglomerates supplant the presumed cultural value of highbrow arts programming.

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<sup>53</sup> In the early 1970s policymakers sought to create a scenario that enabled cable to address the limitations of commercial broadcasting via local programming that attended to minority interests. In fact, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) implemented a series of regulatory decisions between 1972 and 1976 that laid the foundation for the modern cable landscape. First in 1972 the FCC provided a framework for cable operators to expand services in principal broadcast markets when the commission relaxed broadcast signal importation regulations. Simultaneously, the fate of satellite technology as a commercial endeavor was sealed in the same year when the FCC capitulated to the Office of Telecommunications Policy and moved forward with the “Open Skies” plan (Mullen, 2003). Two years later in 1974 the FCC permitted unlimited importation of distant signals at night, after broadcast stations went dark. Then, in 1976 the FCC completely lifted the antileapfrogging provision (Mullen, 2003).



## **Niche Cable Networks and Consumer Citizenship**

Cable networks in the 1980s offered new forms of membership and belonging for individuals via a discrete brand identity that was used to clearly demarcate content for a specific audience (Banet-Weiser, 2007). The form of bourgeois consumer citizenship being articulated at this point in time afforded a new level of democratic legitimacy to personal consumption choices in the seemingly free market. I seek to unravel the slippages that occur between consumption and citizenship in cultural discourse on the Bravo cable network in the 1980s, and to show how these slippages dominated the discursive and material reality surrounding cable technology and niche cable networks in the decade under analysis.

Bravo's bourgeois brand identity and highbrow arts programming served as emblematic markers of the cable network's cultural capital in the 1980s. Cultural capital refers to the social legitimacy afforded to the tastes, knowledge structures, and social competencies of the dominant classes (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural discourse surrounding Bravo's brand identity, programming content, and purported audience naturalized socially constructed class hierarchies. Unlike commercial broadcasters that presumably pandered to an unsophisticated mainstream audience, Bravo offered choice in the free market by selling highbrow arts programming to bourgeois subscribers with "good taste." In alignment with media scholar Toby Miller's (2007) discussion of taste, television, and citizenship, Bravo offered a route to good citizenship for responsible bourgeois consumer citizens attuned to self-governance.

As a niche network reliant upon a technology that was misleadingly situated as the solution to the limitations of commercial broadcasting, Bravo was conferred with democratic legitimacy. Bravo was not a revolutionary technology that offered all citizens equal access to content. To the contrary, it was a class-based niche cable network that offered restricted access to content via subscription fees. Cable technology writ large supported the transition from broadcasting principals grounded in universal access and paternalistic protection to a neoliberal ethos that privileged privatization and consumer choice in the seemingly free market (McMurria, 2007). Bravo is a niche cable network that gives visibility to this shift.

Niche cable networks arose as a valuable source of entertainment and information in the 1980s. Women, African Americans, and children are three audiences that were recognized in new ways via Lifetime, BET, and Nickelodeon, respectively. Clearly niche cable networks reached out to audiences underserved by broadcast television (Banet-Weiser, Chris, & Freitas, 2007). Still, niche cable networks provided stratified access to program content. In the 1980s the notion “that different television forms carry varying levels of cultural capital is not new” (Lotz, 2007b). The difference in the 1980s is that access to programming that is socially deemed to have the “highest” cultural value now comes with an economic barrier (Lotz, 2007b). The trajectory of four cultural arts cable networks founded in the early 1980s – ABC Arts, Bravo, the Entertainment Channel, and CBS Cable – demonstrates the new role privatization and fee-based consumer choice play in the decade under analysis.

### **Taste Hierarchy, Cultural Democracy, and the Free Market?**

In the early 1980s highbrow arts programming was seen as potentially lucrative due to its minimal presence on broadcast television. ABC Arts, Bravo, the Entertainment Channel, and CBS Cable were all founded on the presumption that audiences dissatisfied with the formulaic and commercial nature of broadcast television wanted “intelligent alternatives” (Mullen, 2003). Only two of the four cultural arts networks founded in the early 1980s remained by 1985. Bravo and A&E – the network formerly known as ABC Arts – the two survivors, renegotiated their initial program format to remain financially solvent. The actions of these two cable networks exemplify the role that “free” market and taste hierarchy played for niche cable networks that were misleadingly situated as democratic alternatives to the limitations of mass broadcasting.

Bravo was initially founded as a performing arts network. When three like-minded competitors arose in Bravo’s first ten months of service – ABC Arts, the Entertainment Channel, and CBS Cable – the cable network decided to deviate from its performing arts format with foreign films from directors like Godard, Truffaut, Fellini, and Kurosawa (Schneider, 1985a). The response to the foreign films Bravo aired in 1981 led the cable network to foreground this type of content. By 1985 Bravo’s general manager believed the shift worked well, as the cable network was on the cusp of breaking “into the black” (Schneider, 1985a)

ABC Arts made more major renovations, which included a name change, a new synergist partnership, and a shift in programming. In 1985 A&E – previously known as ABC Arts – made changes in program content that were characterized as

drastic (“Freud, warts and all, sits for camera,” 1985). The programming shift was able to happen due to a joint venture between ABC, RCA, and the Hearst Corporation that provided a new influx of program content for A&E. For example, RCA came with a multi-year contract that provided exclusive rights to BBC programming. A&E capitalized on this by adding British situation comedies and melodramas to the programming lineup. *The New York Times* critic discussing the shift expressed concern with the eclectic and “at first glance disconcerting” mix of entertainment (soapy British melodramas and situation comedies) and arts programming offered on A&E (“Freud, warts and all, sits for camera,” 1985). The media critic added:

The success of the mix as a whole may provide one answer to the long troubling question as to how serious programming of quality, which may never appeal to a mass audience, can be made financially feasible for television. The A&E experience will be crucially pertinent to the future of not only quality pay-cable operations like Bravo but also of the perennially money-strapped public television system. (“Freud, warts and all, sits for camera,” 1985, p. 25)

The above quote suggests that lowbrow programming that appeals to a mass audience – in this case British soaps and situation comedies – enabled A&E to continue to air highbrow programming for a bourgeois audience.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the media critic argues that the financial limitations of cultural arts programming required that A&E pander to a mainstream audience with commercial content. The appeal to the less sophisticated tastes of the mass audience is positioned as the only way channels like A&E, Bravo, and PBS can cater to bourgeois consumer

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<sup>54</sup> Here genre, not geographic location is driving the presumed cultural value of the programming.

citizens interested in quality programming (“Freud, warts and all, sits for camera,” 1985).

The critique of A&E’s incorporation of British melodramas and situation comedies brings to light the role “economic and discursive sleight of hand” plays in the legitimacy of “quality” television (Sewell, 2010, p. 237). As noted by Phillip Sewell (2010), quality television is about the “right people” attesting to the legitimacy of the content – for example, upscale consumers, critics, and television executives. Shifts in what constitute “quality” television are common. These shifts allow for the term to function as an amorphous entity that resists reification (Sewell, 2010).

Even at this early stage, Bravo and A&E’s distribution of cultural arts programming presented financial challenges, as evidenced by the conscious choice both networks made to expand beyond their initial programming platform. In the 1980s, efforts to broaden coverage were a common occurrence amongst basic cable networks seeking to find a balance between programming with low production costs and popular appeal (Mullen 2003). A taste hierarchy grounded in class distinction is used to set highbrow arts programming apart from, and above, commercial broadcast content with mainstream appeal; meanwhile, the primary role that profits, media conglomeration, and market power play in the programming practices of niche cable network is ignored. For Bravo and A&E that meant reassessing, redefining, or expanding beyond the parameters of cultural arts programming. Critical-industrial discourse supported the cultural legitimacy of quality television in two ways. First, a “quality” audience was positioned as

different from a mass audience, and the existence of this audience was used to substantiate the failures of broadcast television. Second, it was presumed that quality TV was a cause that needed to be championed (Sewell, 2010). Bravo's historical trajectory in the 1980s illustrates the presence of both propositions.

The bourgeois consumer citizenship that characterized cultural discourse surrounding Bravo and its programming in the 1980s maintained the illusion of the American Dream by: (1) relying on taste hierarchies that positioned belonging and inclusion as market-based needs that could be met via consumption of highbrow arts programming and (2) situating highbrow arts programming and/or cable technology as viable routes to cultural democracy. Bravo's highbrow arts content purportedly catered to discerning bourgeois consumer citizens interested in education and intellectual stimulation. Periodical coverage of five films that aired on Bravo in the 1980s – *Miracle in Milan*; *Wise Blood*; *First Name: Carmen*; *Last Night at the Alamo*; and *My Beautiful Laundrette* – exemplifies how journalists implicitly and explicitly evoked the binary between highbrow and lowbrow content. Cultural discourse surrounding these films capitalized on three themes: creativity and artistry; intellectual curiosity; and authenticity.

In the 1980s Bravo aired content that was situated by journalists as creative and artistic. For example, the raffishly endearing classic *Miracle in Milan* was lauded for its creativity (Thompson, 1985), as was *First Name: Carmen*, a film so intelligent and thought-provoking, it was expected to “burn up the coaxial” cable that distributed it (Kaplan, 1985, p. 2). *Wise Blood*, a film based on a novel by Flannery O’Conner, was touted for its combination of artistic creativity and

intellect via terms like brilliant, stunning, and eccentric (Thompson, 1985). In addition to creativity and intellectual stimulation, lack of commercial imperatives served as another way for journalists to culturally signify highbrow content. The journalist that discussed *Last Night at the Alamo* implicitly evoked this when he referred to the film as a small and unassuming American classic (Schneider, 1985b). Alternatively, the journalist that attended to *My Beautiful Laundrette* explicitly noted how this film avoided Hollywood's market-driven and special effects-oriented approach to film. In fact, the British import was situated as an extraordinary and unheralded film that offered close observation of life (VanGelder, 1987).

The language used in these examples is representative of the ethos of class distinction interwoven through newspaper coverage of Bravo's highbrow arts programming in the 1980s. Overall, the superior status of Bravo's programming was frequently lauded, and the network was positioned as a channel grounded in creative and provocative programming (Kaplan, 1985). The contrast a *New York Times* journalist made between character driven British "sleepers" and "special effects" driven American films (Van Gelder, 1987) provides an explicit example of the role class distinction played in cultural discourse surrounding the content aired on Bravo. Highbrow arts programming was not a social category constituted through uneven access to leisure time, education, and capital; it was a universal standard associated with specific qualifying terms, and Bravo's aggressive and creative programming was linked to the elevated tastes of bourgeois consumer citizens.

## **From Highbrow Arts in the 1980s to Quality Television in the 2000s**

As a premium subscription cable network grounded in bourgeois consumer citizenship, Bravo is representative of the neoliberal values that dominated the television landscape in the decade under analysis. Television viewers are no longer citizens with equal access to entertainment and information via the public airwaves. Instead, they are bourgeois consumer citizens with the personal responsibility to purchase content in a market devoid of regulations to limit corporate interests and capital accumulation. Discussion of British programming aired on Bravo in the 1980s clearly illustrates the role taste hierarchy and cultural democracy played in discourse surrounding cable television. Here, I rely on two *New York Times* articles by journalist John O’Conner to highlight the tenor of coverage on Bravo’s highbrow arts programming. Interwoven throughout this discussion are glimpses of how an array of pay cable networks that provided highbrow arts programming relied on a similar type of discourse.

It probably does not come as a surprise that content from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has played an important role in the programming histories for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and Bravo. BBC programming has had, and continues to have, an aura of “cultural sophistication” in American society (Ouellette, 1998). Over a decade before Bravo was founded, PBS relied on BBC programming to cater to an upscale, influential, and educated audience interested in literature, drama, and history. PBS’s status as a superior, edifying, and distinguished outlet driven by cultural excellence, and its purported value as a pluralistic and socially responsible route to democratic equality, are two themes



that have guided discourse on this broadcaster (Ouellette, 1998). Like PBS, discourse on Bravo in the twentieth century touted the democratic legitimacy of highbrow arts programming and emphasized concerns regarding the cultural output of television. In both instances, taste hierarchy has obscured “the capitalist economy’s monopoly over economic and cultural production” (Ouellette, 1998, p. 76). The main difference is that PBS is universally accessible, whereas Bravo is a niche cable network that provided a market-based solution for bourgeois consumer citizens.

Bravo used theatrical plays to cater to the niche interests of bourgeois consumer citizens in the 1980s. Coverage of Bravo’s 1986 airing of *The Mystery Plays* is worth quoting at length, as it evoked the class distinction associated with highbrow arts programming during this decade:

The result is a theatrical experience with instant and tremendous impact. The familiar stories of Jesus are told and performed with an uncanny naturalness even as Mr. Harrison’s highly alliterative verse bombards the spectator with artful images. This is language designed to be declaimed, to grab our attention and hold it in public place. The accents are pure York, rooted in the pure north country so dear to Mr. Harrison. Meanwhile, the television cameras and technicians become part of the audience, weaving in and out of scenes like additional and not disruptive guests at the gathering. In this manner, they are able to record the startling rapport between audience and performers. The faces of the spectators – children, teenagers, all ages – reflect their wonderment and nearly total absorption. (O’Conner, 1986, p. 14)

As illustrated above, the language journalist John O’Conner used to describe *The Mystery Plays* aligned with the cultural sophistication and “European” cachet afforded to BBC programming in the late twentieth century (Ouellette, 1998). Adjectives touting the artistic, dramatic, and realistic nature of *The Mystery Plays* were used to frame this content as high culture fit for a discriminating audience.

The airing of theatrical content on niche cable networks was frequently lauded in the 1980s. Of course, not all the cable channels offering theatrical plays turned to the BBC. For example, Showtime, HBO, and A&E all engaged in production and/or co-production of theatrical performances (Schneider, 1985c). In particular, Showtime was the main cable source for theatrical content in New York. Despite low viewership *Broadway on Showtime* sponsored fifty-three productions between 1979 and 1985. According to Allen Sabinson, original programming senior vice president, Showtime's theatrical productions lacked "the broad audience" pulled in with sitcoms and feature films. Still, the executive believed it was valuable "to bring Broadway to subscribers" (Schneider, 1985c, p. 22). At this point in time, Showtime was happy if it reached at least a one-fifth of its viewing audience with its theatrical productions. The qualitative impact of this type of content was of the utmost importance because it helped differentiate Showtime and allowed the pay cable network "to develop tremendous enthusiasm among a select part of the public" (Schneider, 1985c, p. 22).

In the 1980s, cable networks like Bravo, A&E, Showtime, and HBO provided a select public with highbrow arts programming for a fee in the consumer market, as envisioned decades earlier by pay-TV advocates. Showtime, HBO and A&E all sponsored theatrical productions. In contrast, Bravo turned to theatrical productions from the BBC, like *The Mystery Plays*. The theatrical content offered in the 1980s suffered from discouragingly low viewership and eventually became virtually nonexistent in the realm of cable television. Yet this moment helped shape cable television and our understanding of quality programming.

In fact, the critically acclaimed programming offered on HBO in the twenty-first century capitalizes on the authenticity, artistry, and intellectual curiosity commonly associated with the theatrical productions under discussion. Of course, this content is presented in ways that align with commodification and convergence. In particular, we find that new shows on HBO (e.g. *Treme*) use authenticity as a commodity to build the HBO brand. For example, Helen Morgan (2012) highlights the role passionate engagement with *Treme* – a drama set in post-Katrina New Orleans – plays in building HBO’s brand identity via web based technology that symbolically and materially connects viewers to the food, music, businesses, and people in this geographic location in the twenty-first century. The theatrical productions of the 1980s lacked this type of detailed attention to commodification and convergence. Still, they relied on a similar type of cultural value grounded in artistic creativity, authenticity, and intellectual stimulation.

From theatrical content produced by the BBC and aired on PBS and Bravo, to theatrical content produced by Showtime, HBO and A&E, a common thread linking these networks was the cultural capital associated with the programming offered. Documentaries and magazine programs are two additional forms of non-fiction content that evoke a similar type of class distinction. Media scholar Shayne Pepper (2010) highlights the role theatrical productions, documentaries, and magazine programs have played in HBO’s history. Pepper (2010) is concerned that scholars examining HBO have tended to brush over the role PBS-style cultural arts programming has played in this premium cable network’s history. Like Pepper (2010), I am interested in how highbrow arts programming of the 1980s gave

meaning to our cultural understanding of quality television in the twenty-first century, and the role industry discourse played in this process.

*The South Bank Show* – a specific magazine program that aired on Bravo in the late 1980s – demonstrates the role British content played as a form of cultural sophistication for Bravo, and offers further insight into the role industry discourse has played in the cultural constitution of highbrow arts programming.

*The South Bank Show* is a British program with a magazine format that profiles different aspects of popular culture and high art. *South Bank* aligned well with Bravo's attention to the performing arts and niche films. The series, which was produced by Melvyn Bragg, was known for its profiles of musicians, poets, authors, and actors. Various episodes of *South Bank* aired on Bravo in the 1980s. In particular, episodes aired on Bravo in July 1988 brought artists Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, and Paul Bowles to the small screen. Like all the stars interviewed on *The South Bank Show* Morrison, Bellow, and Bowles were not "average television personalities;" instead they were situated as exceptional personalities that could not be seen on "commercial or public television" (O'Conner, 1988, p. 27). The "pay cable Bravo service" was the only venue that aired *South Bank*, which "of course" was not made in America (O'Conner, 1988, p. 27).

Akin to *The Mystery Plays*, *South Bank's* British origins were a sign of high quality. The combination of extraordinary television personalities and premium content made in Britain work together to situate *The South Bank Show* as a highbrow arts program with European cachet. Bravo, the only venue astute enough to air this quality content, was situated as superior to broadcast television

and public television. Bravo often benefited from the status conferred on British programming via the relationship between PBS and the BBC. In this instance, Bravo was a pay-TV service that was superior to PBS, and there was a clear link made between paying for content and receiving “quality” programming. Here we see how access and availability were used to establish the value of Bravo’s programming content. Moreover, we are given insight into the new role economic barriers are beginning to play in content deemed to have the highest cultural value (Lotz, 2007b).

*The South Bank Show* provided serious and demanding content that highlighted artists, poets, novelist, playwrights, and filmmakers. The absence of content like *The South Bank Show* on other networks purportedly spoke to how the masses were uninterested in demanding interviews with serious content that had cultural value. According to O’Conner (1988), the public’s lack of interest in highbrow arts programming made executives attuned to ratings exceedingly nervous, and prohibited the airing of this type of content on broadcast television. O’Conner links commercial sponsorship and popular taste with low quality programming. While ratings are presented as a problem, the capitalist stranglehold on the American television landscape, and the prominent role television plays in the consumer economy, are not addressed. Instead, concerns surrounding commercial sponsorship, ratings, and popular appeal are grounded in taste hierarchy.

Binary distinctions between elite and popular culture are commonly used, and they tend to obscure the role the political economic structure of the television

landscape plays in program content. In this instance, respected novelists are purportedly shunned on broadcast television. O'Conner's (1988) use of the term "respected novelist" legitimizes socially constructed taste hierarchies tied to the cultural sophistication and intellectual acumen associated with highbrow arts programming. Anxieties surrounding mass culture are evoked through a simplistic distinction between broadcast television and cable television. Inferior content is the ultimate problem. In fact, if we exclude Bill Moyers – the only bastion for intelligent literary programming – not even PBS offered solace (O'Conner, 1988). Instead, the only legitimate space for culturally sophisticated content was the seemingly free market.

The similarities and differences between cultural discourse on PBS in the mid-twentieth century and Bravo in the late twentieth century are of fundamental importance for the trajectory of consumer citizenship. One major similarity is the absence of attention to the role the consumer economy plays in the regulatory and political economic climate that grounded the television industry in both time periods. Concerns regarding cultural output of the television industry were also present in both instances. Even the problems – commercial ratings, commercial interruptions, and inadequate attention to quality programming – appeared to be the same. Of course, the answer to how to solve the problem was drastically different. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the answer was universal access to quality content devoid of commercial interests. In this instance, policy makers and advocates concerned with lowbrow mass appeal turned to public television to raise popular taste through "self-cultivation, the spread of education and

enlightenment and the renewal of democratic traditions” (Ouellette, 1998, p. 89).

In contrast, in the 1980s the consumer economy served as the solution to problems with the cultural output of broadcast television.

Bravo, a niche cable outlet that provided highbrow arts programming to discerning consumer citizens with impeccable taste in the 1980s exemplifies how cultural discourse surrounding responses to societal problems were rhetorically grounded in the ethos of bourgeois consumer citizenship. As we have seen, *The New York Times* – a publication that is often characterized as advocating a liberal point of view – commonly fused democratic citizenship with the consumer market in cultural discourse on niche cable networks. In alignment with 1960s liberal democrats, *The New York Times* situated the diversified tastes of niche cable networks as a way to decrease the power of mainstream commercial broadcasting.<sup>55</sup> My attention to this theme matters for at least three reasons.

First, democracy requires a well-informed public that has unrestricted access to a broad range of cultural information and entertainment that articulates various ideas, viewpoints, values, and perspectives. The 1980s marked the first point in time when access to programming deemed to have the highest cultural value came via subscription (Lotz, 2007b). One could argue that having an economic barrier for entertainment programming is different than having an

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<sup>55</sup> According to McMurria (2007) even “liberal democrats” were in agreement with the dominant cultural sentiments on pay-TV. For example, while at first the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) – an organization formed by liberal professional and intellectuals in 1947 – was originally focused on the extension of social welfare policies in the New Deal, by the 1960 the ADA took an anti-communist stance that led the organization to advocate on behalf of the “free market” and begin “protecting” the civil liberties of citizens threatened by over-centralized government (McMurria, 2007). The ADA argued that pay-TV would shift editorial power from the network gatekeepers focused on mass audiences to individual subscriber’s “diversified tastes” (McMurria, 2007).

economic barrier for news programming. Today the veracity of this argument is irrelevant, as both types of content are saddled with this economic barrier. Second, the orientation toward highbrow arts programming presumably grounded in artistry, authenticity, and intellectual stimulation relied on class hierarchy to legitimize bourgeois taste. This class bias misleadingly situated the tastes of the masses as the problem. Moreover, it served as a formidable distraction from the role a consumer economy grounded in ceaseless capital accumulation plays in the material and discursive realities of the media landscape. Finally, the political economic context that has situated radio, broadcast television, cable television, and the Internet illustrates over and over that the market power and commercial imperatives dominate the television industry (Schiller, 2000). For example, as we will see throughout the three decades under analysis, the growth of cable technology and niche cable networks eventually leads to material and discursive practices that support the integration of entertainment and consumption via convergence across an array of industries, texts, and platforms.

In the 1980s, choice, privatization, and the free market dominated cultural discourse. My cases analysis of Bravo illustrates how bourgeois consumer citizenship took hold in cultural discourse surrounding cable technology. In the 1980s, paying for “quality programming” served as a route to good citizenship. Bravo, a small Long Island based cable network, ended up surpassing PBS as an outlet for highbrow arts programming. Subscribing to Bravo offered membership that signified a financial investment in bourgeois content. For this reason, Bravo was deemed as better than PBS. Here we see how paternalistic universal standards



were being replaced by neoliberal values grounded in personal choice, self-governance, and privatization. Highbrow arts programming was purportedly the highest quality content, and it came with a price tag. Bravo needed to sell its brand identity to potential subscribers, and like other cable networks in the 1980s, Bravo relied on program distinction and promotional innovation to accomplish this task.

### **Programming Distinction and Promotional Innovation**

Programming distinction and promotional innovation are two important components that influenced the viability of niche cable networks in the 1980s. These two themes highlight the differing expectations of success for cable programmers, as opposed to their broadcast peers (Lotz, 2007b). Here, I examine the role programming distinction and promotional innovation played in Bravo's brand identity as a cultural arts cable network.

Bravo sought to differentiate itself with highbrow arts programming that catered to the interests of its bourgeois subscriber base. All subscription networks rely on "distinct" programming perceived by potential subscribers to have enough "value" to warrant a subscription fee. Still, there are important differences between basic and premium cable networks (Lotz, 2007b). Basic cable networks rely on a combination of revenue from subscriber fees and advertising. These cable networks are typically sold as a bundle, meaning subscribers buy them as package. Cable operators then pay these basic cable networks a fee for each subscriber. The fee paid is built into the monthly bill, and can range "from a few cents to a few dollars per channel" (Mullen, 2008, p. 16). In contrast, customers pay à la carte to acquire premium cable networks.

As a premium subscription cable network, Bravo succeeded by enticing consumers to acquire a distinct service. In that vein, Bravo was not concerned if viewers “tuned in” for a specific program in the 1980s. Bravo was not beholden to ratings at this point in time. Instead, Bravo wanted subscribers to “pay up” for its distinct programming service (Lotz, 2007b). This can be seen in a few ways. First, the economic capital (e.g. salary) and cultural capital (e.g. education and profession) possessed by Bravo subscribers was of the utmost value. In particular, it was frequently noted that Bravo viewers tended “to be at the higher ends of the economic and educational spectrum” (Schneider, 1985a, p. 36). The attention afforded to the high levels of cultural and economic capital amongst Bravo subscribers is indicative of the value that subscription-based cable networks placed on specific subscriber attributes. An affinity toward the economic and educational prowess of subscribers came along with a decreased interest in the sheer size of an audience for a specific program. Throughout coverage of Bravo in the 1980s, discussion about the size of the viewing audience for a specific program was virtually nonexistent. The foregrounding of qualitative attributes of subscribers and the inattention to the quantitative size of an audience for a specific program work together to illustrate the different way cable networks measure success (Lotz, 2007b).

Programming distinction was also present in the specific programming niche that defined Bravo’s brand identity in the 1980s. Most notably, Bravo situated itself “as an outlet for non-mainstream cinema” that specialized in “presenting the kind of movies most commonly shown in art-film houses or film-

repertory theaters of large cities – European works, American fringe productions, neglected gems of the past” (Schneider, 1985d, p. 26). While this content did not appeal to a mainstream audience, Bravo’s sole reliance on subscription revenue served as an institutional characteristic that allowed the cable network to deliberately exclude viewers that might be offended by, or uninterested in, their programming (Lotz, 2007b).

As a premium subscription network Bravo sought to drive audience members to subscribe to its programming service via a distinct brand identity grounded in a specific programming niche. Accordingly, promotional innovation played an important role in Bravo’s viability (Lotz, 2007b). In particular, while competitors like Showtime, HBO, and Cinemax aired commercially viable motion pictures with mainstream appeal, Bravo’s devotion to foreign/art films was situated as “counter-programming” (Schneider, 1985d). In the 1980s Bravo’s counter-programming allowed the cable network to establish and promote a unique brand identity grounded in content with limited commercial appeal.

Packaging content in a unique way is a promotional strategy that can be used to distinguish a niche cable network’s programming content (Mullen, 2003). The film festival that marked Bravo’s five-year anniversary serves as a specific example of how Bravo packaged its program content. Various hosts - singer Glenda Jackson, actor E.G. Marshall, and director Martin Scorsese – provided an introduction and closing statement for the majority of films aired during the film festival. In particular, Martin Scorsese hosted a seven-week retrospective that highlighted the work of screenwriter Emeric Pressburger and director Michael

Powell. Scorsese reflected on the “British team’s influence on world cinema” and discussed his own film contributions (e.g. *Taxi Driver*) (Schneider, 1985a). Here we can see how Bravo used host Martin Scorsese as a promotional strategy that offered passionate viewers a mediated encounter with British films via the presence and commentary of an iconic and esteemed American movie director.

In the 1980s Bravo was marketed and packaged to hook enthusiastic consumers who had intense feeling about the cultural arts, and Bravo’s niche audience was comprised of educated, upscale consumers willing to pay for access to its highbrow programming service (Battaglio, 1989). Viewer satisfaction with Bravo’s “crowd pleasing” niche films was the cable network’s main focus, even if the gains were more tangible in the mainstream (Schneider, 1985d). Yet Bravo’s programming content and economic model did not coincide. Bravo’s program content resembled basic cable, whereas its sole reliance on subscription revenue situated Bravo as a premium cable network. The next section examines how Bravo addressed this rift.

### **From Premium to Basic Cable**

Satellite technology played an important role in the availability of premium and basic cable channels nationwide in the decade under analysis. Premium cable channels tended to have financial advantages over their basic cable counterparts in the 1980s. As “most premium networks had been in existence since the previous decade, so they had begun to recover start-up costs and had more resources” for programming (Mullen, 2003). This was the case for most premium networks, yet Bravo was the exception. Bravo was a premium subscription network founded in

1980, whereas competitors HBO and Showtime launched in 1971 and 1976 respectively. Bravo's sole reliance on subscription revenue situated it as a premium channel.<sup>56</sup> Still, its late start as a premium service meant a limited program budget and content that aligned with basic cable networks like A&E and AMC. Here I examine Bravo's shift from premium to basic cable at the end of the decade and the role that programming content, subscribers, and ownership played in this process.

Bravo's programming content had similarities with basic cable networks like A&E, AMC, TNT, and Discovery in the 1980s. Bravo and A&E – two survivors from the four cultural channels launched at the beginning of the decade – both aired foreign films (Schneider, 1985a). Bravo and AMC were owned by the same parent company, the former an outlet for foreign film enthusiasts and the latter a venue for classic films aficionados. Both films channels had a highly defined niche audience. Like Bravo's sister network AMC, TNT aired classic films (Vorhees, 1989). Finally, Bravo, Discovery, and A&E all aired documentaries in the 1980s. Thematically these five channels fit together well at the end of the 1980s. They all air some derivation of low cost highbrow arts programming for a bourgeois audience seeking intelligent alternatives to broadcast television.

While Bravo had many programming similarities with basic cable networks, it also had programming overlaps with premium cable networks like HBO. For

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<sup>56</sup> As late as 1989, Bravo is situated as premium service in the press. For example in April 1989, Bravo "normally a premium service" provided basic subscribers with access to the program "Unfinished Stories" a "13-hour special to raise money for the American Foundation for AIDS Research" (Gerard, 1989, p. 16). Similarly, Bravo's status as a premium cable network is reflected in its association with The Movie Channel, HBO, and Showtime in scholarly research. For example cable scholar Megan Mullen's historical overview of the cable industry notes, "in 1980 The Movie Channel, HBO, and Showtime were joined by Bravo" (2003, p. 110).

example, Bravo and HBO both utilized motion pictures as a programming staple in the 1980s.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, if we look closely at Bravo and HBO we find notable differences. The primary differences between Bravo and HBO are noted in figure 4 and figure 5 and are discussed below.

**Figure 4: Launch Date, Ownership, and Societal Recognition**

	<i>Launch Date</i>	<i>Ownership</i>	<i>Societal Recognition</i>
<i>Bravo</i>	1980	Cablevision	Regional
<i>HBO</i>	1971	Time Inc.	National

On the one hand, Bravo was a premium cable network launched in 1980 by Cablevision. In the 1980s, Bravo’s parent company was a growing Long Island cable provider just beginning to engage in cable/broadcast convergence. Bravo had notoriety in New York, but it lacked nationwide awareness.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, HBO was a well-situated premium cable network founded in 1971. HBO had national recognition amongst the general public in 1980s. Owned by Time Inc., HBO was part of a wealthy, vertically and horizontally integrated media conglomerate. Start-up date, ownership, and societal recognition are three areas that highlight how HBO was better situated as a premium network in the 1980s cable television industry.

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<sup>57</sup> HBO airs other programming such as sports (e.g. boxing) and original comedy specials (e.g. *The Bette Milder Show*). Nonetheless, HBO initially made a name for itself based on its airing of theatrical films (Mullen, 2003). Whereas Bravo airs other programming in particular performing arts content. Nonetheless, niche films account for 70 percent of Bravo programming (Schneider, 1985a).

<sup>58</sup> For example, as discussed earlier in the chapter when Cablevision expanded cable service to Washington D.C. in 1988 D.C. Cablevision office employees could not explain, “what Bravo was” (Bruske, 1988, p. 1).

**Figure 5: Brand Distinction, Content Acquisition, and Subscribers**

	<i>Brand Distinction</i>	<i>Content Acquisition</i>	<i>Number Subscribers</i>
<i>Bravo</i>	Niche Films	Low cost acquisitions	350 Thousand
<i>HBO</i>	Feature Films	Co-productions and pricy acquisitions	14.5 Million

Bravo and HBO both had brand distinction. Yet scholarly research and industry discourse suggests these two brands were distinct for very different reasons. Bravo’s brand distinction came from its highbrow arts content (low cost films, theatrical productions, music, and documentaries). In particular, Bravo was known for the airing of niche films that were unedited and free of commercials. In contrast, HBO’s brand distinction was grounded in its status as “a venue for screening theatrical films in an uninterrupted and unedited form – often well in advance of broadcast or basic cable release” (Lotz, 2007b, p. 85). Like Bravo, HBO aired films unedited and uninterrupted. Still, HBO relied on joint productions, ownership in a film studio, and/or investing in movies to acquire exclusive rights to “mainstream titles, produced by large American studios or high-profile independents, and typically preceded by wide theatrical distribution” (Schneider, 1985d, p. 26). In fact, HBO built its brand identity around the idea “that subscribers can get products on HBO that they can get nowhere else” (Jaramillo, 2002, p. 65). In the decade under analysis, that product was mainstream feature films.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> HBO has aired original programming since the late 1970s, although original programming becomes a much larger portion of HBO’s schedule starting in the 1990s.

As noted earlier, HBO aired PBS style cultural arts content in the 1980s, and this should not be overlooked (Pepper, 2010). Yet HBO was situated in a wealthy parent company that enabled the premium cable network to acquire costly commercial films, produce original theatrical content, and generate original non-fiction content (e.g. documentaries and magazine programming). Unlike Bravo, HBO devoted generous funding to highbrow arts. Moreover, HBO combined attention to the highbrow arts with commercially viable mainstream films. In fact, HBO was known in the 1980s as the primary source for mainstream feature films on television. Similarly, if we look at the subscriber base for these two premium cable networks, we find that HBO had 14.5 million subscribers nationwide in 1985 and Bravo had 350,000 subscribers nationwide (Schneider, 1985d).<sup>60</sup>

From launch date, ownership and societal recognition; to brand distinction, acquisition of content, and subscribers; HBO was more mainstream. Granted, both cable networks offered highbrow arts programming. Nonetheless, HBO's distinction came from commercially viable Hollywood movies that were aired unedited and without interruption. Bravo counter-programmed against HBO, and other premium cable networks, with niche/special interest films that had distinction based on their financing (independent films) and country of production (foreign films). Before turning to chapter four, I use the conclusion of chapter three to situate Bravo and the cable industry at the end of the 1980s.

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<sup>60</sup> While Bravo's subscriber base is limited it does experience growth. For example, in 1981 Bravo had 48,000 subscribers, while in 1985 its nationwide subscribers reached 350,000 (Schneider, 1985a).



## **Conclusion**

In the 1980s the cable industry was experiencing massive growth. Annual revenues from fees and advertising rose to an estimated \$15.4 million in 1989, more than double the \$6.5 million in revenue generated in 1983 (Carter, 1989, p. 1). As a case example, Bravo exemplifies the increasingly prominent role commodification came to play for niche cable networks. Bravo started the 1980s as a premium cable network reliant on subscription fees and it finished the decade as a basic cable network supported by a dual revenue stream that incorporated advertising. Accordingly, in the 1990s Bravo is able to capitalize on advertisers interested in purchasing its valuable bourgeois audience commodity.

At the end of the 1980s broadcast networks were losing viewers and cable networks were experiencing substantial annual gains in subscribers and receiving national attention (Carter, 1989). Bravo catered to the needs of niche audiences with highbrow arts programming grounded in class distinction. This cable network allowed bourgeois consumer citizenship to pay for the quality content that was presumably unavailable on broadcast television. Like other cable networks, Bravo's programming model was grounded in the democratic legitimacy of consumer choice in the seemingly free market. The medium of television was in the process of transitioning from a universal public service equally accessible to all via the broadcast airwaves to a resource guided by a privatized technology that required a subscription fee. Moreover, broadcast/cable convergence was situated as a way to better meet the needs of consumers.

Given the pertinent role cable/broadcast convergence played in the late 1980 and continues to play in the 1990s, it is useful to reflect on the Cablevision and NBC partnership mentioned earlier in the chapter. This arrangement offered notable benefits for Cablevision/Bravo and NBC. NBC's partial ownership of Bravo, via its 50% stake in Rainbow Programming ("Cablevision Systems Corporation," 2010) had value for parent company Cablevision. Most notably, Bravo was a cultural arts cable network that lacked national recognition and being connected to a transnational media conglomerate with a vast array of resources had proved successful for other cable networks. For example, the Viacom owned cable networks discussed at the beginning of the chapter – MTV, VH1, and Nickelodeon – were nationally recognized basic cable networks (Fabrikant, 1989). Of course this deal also benefitted NBC, as Rainbow Programming was comprised of two niche cable networks, Bravo and AMC. Given that broadcast networks were experiencing notable losses, and cable networks were receiving national recognition and experiencing advertiser/subscriber growth (Carter, 1989), NBC's partial acquisition of Rainbow Programming Service couldn't have come at a better time.

At the end of the decade, with the majority of the nation wired, cable television was "entering a new phase" characterized by "an even greater surge of growth based on better programming and more aggressive marketing" (Carter, 1989, p. 1). Bourgeois consumer citizenship dominated Bravo's brand identity in the 1980s media landscape. In the 2000s, as lifestyle and technological convergence become intertwined via the interactivity of the digital media landscape, we find a shift to nouveau riche consumer citizenship. In the 1990s,

Bravo is still a highbrow arts programmer. Taste hierarchy and class distinction still remain central to Bravo's brand identity in the upcoming decade. Yet conflicts arise due to Bravo's reliance on advertising. Throughout the 1990s Bravo strives to increase its mainstream commercial appeal and to maintain the cultural capital associated with its highbrow arts programming model. This presents issues as it becomes more apparent that highbrow arts programming does not align well with consumer lifestyle, as the next chapter demonstrates.

## CHAPTER 4

### CABLE AND BROADCAST TV IN THE 1990S: FROM CATEGORICALLY DIFFERENT TO BLURRED BOUNDARIES

In August of 1999, *Advertising Age* highlighted the joint buy Victoria's Secret made on Bravo and AMC. This effort to sponsor fashion-oriented programming was unique for the two networks, both of which Cablevision Systems Corp. held majority ownership in. The description of the sponsorship in *Advertising Age* noted:

On AMC, Victoria's Secret will be the sole sponsor of *Hollywood Fashion Machine*, a series hosted by Daryl Hannah. At the end of the program, a spot will promote fashion programming on Bravo also sponsored by Victoria's Secret; similarly, Bravo's programming will point viewers in the direction of AMC. (Ross & Cardona, 1999, p. 1)

As indicated in the quote above, each network – AMC and Bravo – offered promotional spots touting fashion programming on its sister network. At this point in time, AMC relied on a sponsorship model in which commercial advertisements ran only before and after, not during programming. AMC's limited use of advertising purportedly made the cable network "attractive" to prospective clients (Ross & Cardona, 1999). In fact, Ross & Cardona (1999) further note, "Bravo used a similar model for years before it changed formats and added commercials during movies. There is speculation AMC eventually will adopt that model as well" (p.1).

The example above illustrates an important commercial shift for Bravo and AMC in the 1990s. In one decade, Bravo moved from the exemplar of "limited" commercial sponsorship, to a full commercial format that sister network AMC was likely to adopt. This synergistic cross promotion exemplifies the new role

commercial interests played at these two sibling cable networks at the end of 1990s. Simultaneously, Bravo and AMC's synergistic cross promotion is indicative of basic cable's new level of commercial viability at the close of the decade.

The 1990s served as a pivotal decade in the television industry. During this time period, shifts in the technological, political economic, and cultural framework that had guided network TV continued to leave an indelible mark on the media landscape. The field of production studies offers insights into the role industry convergence, branding, and commodification played in this process. Mid-level industry discourse and practices give visibility to the workings of niche cable channels within a post-network media landscape. Bravo serves as a fitting case example that illustrates the changes underway as the cable industry became an integral component in the digital media landscape.

As we know, Bravo started the 1990s as a basic cable network that relied on program sponsorship. During this decade, the significant gains that basic cable made altered the dynamics between cable and broadcast television. At the close of the decade, industry discourse attended to the similarities between cable and broadcasting. Any distinct boundaries that had existed dissipated as the two mediums slowly converged (Schmuckler, 1997). Shifts in collective prime-time ratings and advertising are two indicators that were used to signify how the gap between basic cable and network TV was closing. Basic cable networks surpassed the collective prime-time ratings of the four broadcast networks for the first time, while hundreds of millions in advertising spending also migrated to cable (Schmuckler, 1997).

From spending on original programming and audience size, to access to mainstream feature films, basic cable networks now more closely resembled their broadcast peers (Schmuckler, 1997).<sup>61</sup> Basic cable was also looking more like its broadcast peers economically. Most notably, the massive influx of cable networks in the early 1990s meant lower subscription fees and more reliance on advertising. Broadcast networks also did their part to look more like cable networks. In particular, broadcasters emulated the niche orientation of cable by turning to specific audience profiles to fine-tune their demographic.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the media conglomerates that owned the big four broadcast networks responded by investing in, buying, and/or partnering with cable properties (Schmuckler, 1997).

Change was also underway via the transition from broadcast to digital television, and major figures in the computer industry advocated the need to embrace a “market driven approach to advanced television standards” (Castañeda, 2007). As transnational media conglomerates vied for control and continued the drive toward full commercialization, the fate of digital television specifically, and of the digital media landscape writ large was sealed. Cable and satellite were of the utmost importance. In fact, by the start of the new century, the United States government recognized the role these technologies would come to play in the

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<sup>61</sup> For example, TBS, TNT, and USA boosted spending on signature programming and even snatched up content broadcast networks wanted to acquire (Schmuckler, 1997). Bravo’s “The Count of Monte Cristo” serves as “a good example of how far original programming has come” (Katz, 1999, p. 54). The 8 hour mini-series, which cost \$20 million to produce, was touted as a “marriage of international theatrical talent” – it starred Gerard Depardieu and would be aired in French with English subtitles – and “the domestic small screen” (Katz, 1999, p. 54).

<sup>62</sup> For example, Fox’s audience profile was hip and young, while CBS attended to older viewers in the heartland. Overall, broadcast networks played to a more particular audience (Schmuckler, 1997).

retransmission of broadcast digital television (Castañeda, 2007). The sections that follow trace Bravo's trajectory in the 1990s to illustrate the increasingly central role branding, commodification, and convergence played in Bravo's rise to commercial prominence.

### **Neoliberal Discourse, Audience Commodification, and Narrowcasting**

A phrase in the trade publication *Advertising Age* – “Bravo: We’re PBS without the Begging” – speaks to the cultural climate that supported Bravo’s status as a highbrow arts programmer in the early 1990s (Jensen, 1993, p. 21). This slogan did not derive from and was never used by Bravo. Instead, the tagline was the result of a contest run by *Advertising Age*, in which the publication asked their readers to come up with “the next promotional campaign for a broadcast or cable network” (Jensen, 1993, p. 21). The tagline’s presence in a contest amongst industry professionals that read *Advertising Age* aligns with the neoliberal ethos that pervaded Bravo’s historical trajectory. In this section, I use Bravo as a case example to illustrate the increasing role audience commodification played in the evolution of basic cable television networks, and to highlight the implications of this trend for the discursive and material iteration of bourgeois consumer citizenship in the 1990s.

David Harvey (2010) argues that the final two decades of the twentieth century reshaped mental conceptions of the world by appealing to “neoliberal principals of individual liberty as necessarily embedded in free markets and free trade” (p. 131). In this climate, government and industry claimed to be meeting the needs of all Americans by creating a market that was purportedly devoid of

regulatory constraints (Castañeda, 2000). In actuality, both the regulatory practices and discursive climate favored corporations. Simultaneously, an individualized lifestyle driven by niche consumerism and grounded in postmodern urbanization (e.g. gentrification and commercialization) conveniently aligned with the rise of social movements centered in identity politics and an ethos of self governance guided by individual responsibility (Harvey, 2010).

Unfortunately, the misguided belief that individual responsibility and self-governance made social provisions unnecessary and displaced collective responsibility in lieu of good taste and niche cultural commodification. In this climate, “better citizenship” meant favoring “bourgeois manners for a circumscribed set of individuals in one period” and providing stratified access to content and services based upon specific demographic characteristics (Miller, 2007, p. 11). In the 1990s, viewers no longer needed to withstand PBS’s appeals for collective public support in order to gain access to highbrow arts programming. Quite the contrary, the rise of communications deregulation, neoliberal individualism, and consumer choice in the purportedly free market situated Bravo as a bourgeois cable network that allowed consumer citizens to buy access to highbrow arts programming.

Basic cable networks like Bravo commoditized and channeled “the affective and effective demands” associated with niche markets (Harvey, 2010, p. 131). The fetishism of democratic access, control, and choice – situated in a commercial environment driven by individualism, commodification, and technological convergence – oriented the cultural and political economic climate toward niche



markets, lifestyle choices, and consumer practices. In the 1990s the free market was apparently the place to meet the needs of all consumer citizens, and a neoliberal ethos driven by individual satisfaction fully undergirded the discursive and material practices that constituted reality. Accordingly, the submission of the slogan “Bravo: We’re PBS without the Begging” – to an *Advertising Age* promotional activity unaffiliated with Bravo – appears to be an accurate portrayal of the cultural and political economic climate that plagued the media landscape (Jensen, 1993, p. 21). To understand the changes underway in the 1990s we need to examine the role broadcasting played from the 1950s to the 1980s, as well as attend to the pivotal role narrowcasting played at the close of the twentieth century.

Television arose in the mid-twentieth century as a mass medium that relied on networking, which meant that the three national networks at this point in time (ABC, CBS, and NBC) were affiliated with local stations throughout the country. In the words of Lotz, the practice of “networking recouped the tremendous costs of creating television programming by producing one show, distributing it to a nationwide audience, and selling advertising that would reach that massive national audience” (2007a, pp. 9-10). Until the 1980s the primary goal was to broadcast program content that was “likely to be acceptable to, although perhaps not most favored by, the widest range of viewers” (Lotz, 2007a, p. 11).

Starting in the 1980s, gradual changes altered the television production, distribution, and consumption industries. Salient transitions that occurred over two decades expanded access, control, and choice for producers, distributors, and

viewers. From the rise of niche cable networks and new broadcast competitors,<sup>63</sup> to cable and satellite penetration, alternative networks and distribution systems shifted how television was experienced (Lotz, 2007a). Channel expansion gave rise to narrowcasting. Since narrowcast networks serve a niche audience with “highly defined and delimited tastes” (Meehan, 2002, pp. 219-220), the rise of this practice had significant implications for the use of advertising on television. Narrowcasting not only allowed advertisers to tailor messages to a fine-tuned audience segment; it also offered these advertisers “high quality consumers – people with disposable income, desire, and retail access to buy brand names frequently, loyally, and impulsively” (Meehan, 2005, p. 117).

In the 1990s Bravo was a narrowcast cable network that aired highbrow arts programming to an upscale, educated, and influential audience demographic. As a basic cable network, advertising was Bravo’s primary revenue source.<sup>64</sup> Bravo did not have a large audience, but it did have a quality audience, and Bravo sold this valuable audience commodity to prospective advertisers. For example, in 1992 Bravo used a promotional campaign in trade journals to sell its bourgeois audience by boasting “many of the network’s viewers are ‘influential and hold leadership positions’ across the U.S.” (“Newswire Roundup,” 1992, para. 2).

Throughout the 1990s, Bravo capitalized on its desirable audience demographic by using class distinction to sell a bourgeois audience with

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<sup>63</sup> Between 1986 and 1995 three new broadcast networks were founded, Fox, The WB, and UPN (Lotz, 2007a).

<sup>64</sup> In contrast, in the 1980s Bravo was a narrowcast premium cable network. As a premium cable network in the 1980s, Bravo sold programming directly to consumers for a substantial subscription fee.

purportedly high levels of economic and cultural capital to advertisers. While Bravo “attracted far fewer viewers” than did broadcast networks, the presumption was that Bravo “attracted better consumers” (Meehan, 2005, p. 46).<sup>65</sup> From that point of view, good taste and niche cultural commodification were pivotal to Bravo’s growth (Miller, 2007). Accordingly, the examples that follow demonstrate how class distinction and audience commodification shaped the historical trajectory of consumer citizenship in the digital media landscape. The first example looks at Texaco’s sponsorship of Bravo programming, and the second turns to Mercedes-Benz.

Through periodical coverage on Texaco’s promotional support of Bravo programming, we are able to see the role class distinction and taste hierarchy played in Bravo’s status as a niche cable network that provided bourgeois consumer citizens with access to highbrow arts programming. In this instance, narrowcasting and competition were used to situate Bravo as a democratic alternative to the limitations of mass broadcasting. Ironically, this occurred as basic cable networks became more beholden to commercial interests. For Bravo, that meant commodifying the “good taste” of bourgeois consumer citizens in the free market (Miller, 2007). The attention afforded to exclusivity, limited commercial interruptions, and distinction found in press coverage of the Mercedes-Benz sponsorship arrangement brings to light the new role commodification played at Bravo. Overall, both Texaco and Mercedes-Benz are indicative of the natural and unremarkable discursive and material practices that situate – but in no way

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<sup>65</sup> Since the early 1970s cable viewers have been seen as better consumers as they not only paid to watch, but they also “watched more television than nonsubscribers” (Meehan, 2005, p. 46).

determine – the parameters of power and resistance in the digital media landscape (Streeter, 1996).

In February 1992, *Advertising Age* entertainment journalist Joseph Mandese congratulated Bravo for an eighteen-month sponsorship deal with the words “Bravo for airtime!” (Mandese, 1992, p. 29). Mandese (1992) was interested in the *Texaco Performing Arts Showcase (TPAS)* due to the new role advertising now played at the Bravo cable network. In contrast, *New York Times* journalist John O’Conner (1993) attended to the programming possibilities brought about through Texaco’s sponsorship of performing arts programming on Bravo. O’Conner (1993) situated the *TPAS* as a dividend linked to cable narrowcasting, since television adaptations of stage plays were typically the domain of PBS. The journalist positioned highbrow arts programming as substantive content with a presumed superiority over mass broadcasting, and he situated PBS and Bravo as sources of cultural capital for discerning audiences interested in quality television content.

PBS and Bravo were frequently equated in 1990s press coverage, and there are similarities between the two cultural arts networks. In the 1990s, both PBS and Bravo positioned themselves as outlets for discerning viewers uninterested in the popular appeal of mass commercial broadcasting. Moreover, both networks relied on class distinction and taste hierarchy to substantiate the value of their presumably superior program content. The paternalistic concerns that drove each network’s educational and enlightening highbrow arts programming were similar. Still, PBS, as a not-for-profit broadcast outlet, offered a universally accessible alternative to the purportedly lowbrow and crass content provided on commercial

networks. Alternatively Bravo, a for-profit niche cable network, provided fee-based access to highbrow arts programming via basic cable subscription.

Coverage of the *TPAS* in *The Washington Post* also addressed the programming similarities between Bravo and PBS. In this instance, though, journalist Joseph McLellan's (1992) commentary highlights how cultural discourse that presumed the validity of the phrase "Bravo: We're PBS without the Begging" (Jensen, 1993, p. 21) was present in the 1990s. McLellan (1992) attended to Texaco's long history sponsoring highbrow arts programming on PBS (e.g. Metropolitan Opera). Then, he noted that Texaco was no longer underwriting PBS programming. McLellan positioned Texaco's decision to sponsor performing arts programming on Bravo instead of PBS as a move that could "seriously affect the balance of the power between" the two commercial-free networks (McLellan, 1992, p. 6). He argued the shift had the potential to raise the "level of competition in good programming," and from his perspective, the badly needed competition could only benefit "listeners with high standards" (McLellan, 1992, p. 6).

Here again, the programming similarities between Bravo and PBS are deemed to be readily apparent. Yet, in this instance the presumption was that the revolutionary power of competition and choice in the free market would transform PBS. McLellan's commentary paid no attention to how the for-profit (Bravo) and not-for-profit (PBS) orientation of two seemingly synonymous commercial-free cultural arts networks influenced programming budgets and programming content. Rather, his commentary presumed the validity and inherent value of free-market competition. In alignment with the scholarship of Toby Miller (2007), my

discussion of O’Conner (1993) and McLellan (1993) illustrates how social provisions are ignored, as self-governance and taste displace collective responsibility through neoliberal discursive and material practices that foreground bourgeois consumer citizenship.

Despite their similarities, PBS arose out of concerns surrounding access to quality information and entertainment, and the network supposedly supported the “renewal of democratic traditions” by providing universal access to the highbrow arts programming (Ouellette, 1998, p. 89). Alternatively, Bravo (a narrowcast cable network), purportedly provided consumer citizens with a viable democratic alternative to the limitations of commercial broadcasting in the free market. What is most apparent when we contrast Bravo and PBS is the role privatization has played in the trajectory of television. The orientation toward collective responsibility and social provisions that gave rise to PBS was nonexistent by the 1990s. Neoliberal ideology and the full force of a deregulated market had replaced a liberal framework that privileged paternalistic ideals tied to universal standards (Streeter, 1996; McMurria, 2007).

I started this example by highlighting the underwriting deal between Bravo and Texaco that led to the creation of the *TPAS*. This showcase marked the first time Bravo solicited program sponsorship, and *Advertising Age* journalist Joe Mandese (1992) was pleased that the “commercially uninterrupted” niche cable network took this big step. Still, he also highlighted that Bravo would “remain free of commercial breaks” (Mandese, 1992, p. 29). This brings to light an important theme that followed Bravo throughout the 1990s. Bravo was clearly becoming

more commercial, but Bravo's restrained use of sponsorship meant that programming was not interrupted for advertisements.

Exclusive commercial sponsorships and limited commercial interruption were the means by which Bravo maintained its class distinction. Bravo's initial advertising format was frequently compared to the use of sponsorship at PBS. This allowed Bravo to remain a highbrow alternative for cultural elites. Bravo, like PBS, did not cater to the tastes of the masses. In alignment with the neoliberal climate that characterized the communication industries at this point in time, Bravo was situated as a quality choice for bourgeois consumer citizens willing and able to pay for basic cable services. Given that consumer citizenship was a pivotal component in Bravo's historical trajectory, I now turn to Bravo's sponsorship deal with Mercedes-Benz to illustrate the salient role exclusive sponsorships, limited commercial interruptions, and audience distinction played in Bravo's highbrow advertising climate.

In 1992 Mercedes-Benz began sponsoring Bravo programming through its support of *Mercedes-Benz BBC Showcase* and *Mercedes-Benz World Cinema*. Both showcases speak to the cultural caché afforded to Bravo's brand identity, programming content, and purported audience in the 1990s, and the desire Mercedes-Benz had to cash in on these qualities. *Advertising Age* journalist Jeff Jensen evoked the aura of class distinction associated with both parties. According to Jensen, Mercedes-Benz, an automotive manufacturer that "claims to sacrifice nothing when making cars," has used the "the same philosophy" to promote their vehicles (Jensen, 1992, p. 25). Mercedes-Benz's philosophy for vehicle promotion

closely resembled the “philosophy of no-limits spending on branding” taken by Nike, a company that symbolized the epitome of brand nirvana in the 1990s (Klein, 2000, p. 197). In both instances, image was of the utmost importance. Mercedes-Benz relied on a salient brand identity grounded in class distinction to sell its prestigious vehicles. The exclusive nature of the sponsorship arrangement between Bravo and Mercedes-Benz, along with high quality program atmosphere at Bravo, cost the automotive manufacturer \$1 million. In return, Mercedes-Benz was “one of only three advertisers” sponsoring programming on Bravo, and more importantly, the sole automotive manufacturer advertising on the cable network (Jensen, 1992, p. 25).<sup>66</sup>

It is useful to note the shift in corporate sponsorship occurring at the end of the twentieth century. In the 1980s corporate sponsorship “took off as a stand-in for public funds” (Klein, 2000, p. 34). While corporate sponsorship started as a “hybrid of philanthropy and image promotion,” by the 1990s it began to be treated as a highly effective marketing tool (Klein, 2000, p. 34).<sup>67</sup> During the 1990s, corporations began to demand more from their sponsorships. They looked for control over sponsorships and grander acknowledgements, and at times even bought events outright (Klein, 2000). The sponsorship arrangement between Mercedes-Benz and Bravo exemplifies this shift. Especially since, corporate underwriting served as an important revenue stream, as well as a route to brand

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<sup>66</sup> The other two deals were with Texaco and Eastman Kodak Co. (Jensen, 1992).

<sup>67</sup> Corporate sponsorship rose from “\$ 7-billion-a-year industry in 1991 to a \$19.2 million one in 1999” (Klein, 2000, p. 34).



and package Bravo's programming content and Mercedes-Benz's vehicles as commodities with distinct value.

Bravo's highbrow arts programming was situated within a network context that offered status distinction in a mass-produced and homogenized television landscape. The programming atmosphere at Bravo offered highbrow content with limited commercial interruptions. Bravo's limited use of PBS-style corporate underwriting purportedly increased revenue without annoying upscale, elite, and educated viewers accustomed to a high quality program environment (Jensen, 1992). Moreover, the cultural and economic capital of Bravo's audience commodity meant that Mercedes-Benz was buying access to viewers who were more likely to seek out elite lifestyle brands (Schor, 1999).<sup>68</sup>

Bravo's advertising format in the 1990s was guided by two themes: exclusive sponsorships with limited commercial interruption and the rise of narrowcasting. As a narrowcaster, Bravo tapped into valuable "upscale" households. Bravo's audience encompassed viewers with stellar professional status and higher-than-average incomes. In the realm of professional status, Bravo was one of ten cable networks that averaged 25.3% for "professional/managerial-level viewers" (Cooper, 1999). Similarly, Bravo pulled in a viewing audience with a high median income. The highbrow arts programmer was amongst five basic cable networks that boasted median incomes above \$50,000. Viewer of The Learning Channel (\$52,781) and MSNBC (\$53,046) had median incomes in the low 50s,

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<sup>68</sup> Schor (1999) highlights that level of cultural capital is associated with consumer purchasing practices. Low levels of cultural capital tends to be aligned with the purchase of mass-produced goods, whereas high levels of cultural capital tends to be aligned with status oriented consumption.

while E! (\$54,075) and CNBC (\$54,873) covered the mid 50s. Bravo surpassed its peers, topping the charts in basic cable with a median income of \$58,082 (Cooper, 1999). Bravo's upscale audience was of the utmost value for the network's solicitation of advertising, and its highbrow arts programming was supposedly the draw for this valuable audience niche. Nonetheless, Bravo's move to an advertising-supported format meant the cable network needed to expand its commercial appeal. The next section examines the conflicted role *Twin Peaks* played in this process.

### ***Twin Peaks and Shifts in the Practice of Syndication***

To understand the practice of syndication requires attention to how content was produced and distributed in the network era. Traditionally, national broadcast networks – CBS, ABC, and NBC – paid cash to a production company for the exclusive right to air a show for a specific period of time. Major broadcast networks primarily relied on local affiliates<sup>69</sup> to distribute program content. These independent stations were paid to air “primetime” and “latenight” programming alongside national advertising (Shimpach, 2010). The presence of various production companies, but only three broadcast networks, compelled producers to rely on “deficit financing.” This meant that the cost of production was not covered in the price the major broadcast networks paid to air any given series. Under these

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<sup>69</sup> While major networks in the United States can and did own and operate local stations, regulatory constraints set a cap on the percentage of the US population that any given corporate entity could reach. Typically, major networks owned and operated their own stations in large markets (Shimpach, 2010.)

circumstances, the practice of syndication<sup>70</sup> is what allowed producers to make a profit (Shimpach, 2010). The massive proliferation of cable channels in the late twentieth century led to shifts away from the distribution practices that reigned in the network era. In a moment of digital convergence, “off network reruns”<sup>71</sup> served as a staple for basic cable networks with limited programming budgets (Lotz, 2007a).

The distribution of off-network reruns does not rely on the practice of affiliation. Instead, off network reruns are distributed via the process of syndication. Following cable scholar Megan Mullen, I situate syndication as “a practice of distributing programs on a market-by-market basis instead of through an affiliation agreement” (2008, p. 18). Market-by-market syndication of off-network reruns played a primary role in the trajectory of basic cable networks in the 1990s. The strategy Bravo executives used to promote *Twin Peaks* – an off-network dramatic series that first aired via affiliate networking for two seasons on ABC (1989/1990 and 1990/1991) – highlights the contradictory tensions Bravo faced at this point in time. Bravo’s distribution of *Twin Peaks* occurred within a new program showcase. *TV Too Good For TV* was positioned as a long-standing Bravo showcase that was being launched with the distribution of *Twin Peaks* (Zad,

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<sup>70</sup> Approximately four television seasons, usually this meant close to 100 episodes, needed to air before a series could move to weekday syndication. Weekday syndication allowed local affiliates to purchase rights to a show and air it in a regular timeslot five days a week (Shimpach, 2010).

<sup>71</sup> The term “off network rerun” signifies a series that is being distributed by an individual broadcast or cable network that previously aired nationwide via the practice of affiliate networking.

1993). From this perspective, the *TV Too Good For TV* “thematic showcase”<sup>72</sup> can be seen as a framing strategy (Mullen, 2003). Bravo’s neophyte status as a basic cable network required an increase in viewership and the demarcation of a clear territory that made sense to advertisers, and one way Bravo sought to achieve these aims was with a new thematic showcase. Here, I use the *TV Too Good For TV* showcase as a point of entry into the role the marketing and packaging of previously aired broadcast program content played for basic cable networks in the 1990s.

As a drama characterized by a cult following, *Twin Peaks* was not exactly mainstream. Nonetheless, the show’s airing on broadcast television suggests that it had more popular appeal than the content found on Bravo at this point in time. In fact, the two-hour movie pilot used to launch the series on ABC received high ratings (Bickelhaupt, 1990). Moreover, *Twin Peaks* was hailed in the mainstream press. For example, *New York Times* journalist John O’Conner noted the director’s attention to dramatic form, while highlighting how David Lynch “adds his own peculiar touches, small pass details that suddenly, and often hilariously, thrust the commonplace out of kilter” (1990, para. 6). Ultimately, a ratings slump and limited commercial viability played a primary role in the show’s cancellation (Roush, 1990). Still, positive press coverage and the initial ratings success during the

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<sup>72</sup> Here I differentiate between two types of thematic framing: “thematic programming” and “thematic showcases” (Mullen, 2003). Thematic programming relies on recurring character types and/or story lines to unite content. For example, “Nick at Nite” used “Men in the Kitchen” as a character type to unite episodes across various classic situation comedies (Mullen, 2003). Simultaneously, “Nick at Nite” itself is a broader type of thematic framing strategy, a thematic showcase that highlights classic situation comedies.

show's original run on ABC suggest that this cult classic had the potential to increase viewership for Bravo.

Bravo did not foreground the popular appeal of *Twin Peaks* when it marketed the *TV Too Good For TV* showcase. Instead, Bravo branded *Twin Peaks* as "quality" entertainment. The dramatic series was situated in a thematic showcase that emphasized "programs of unique artistic vision and critical acclaim, rather than those with high ratings" (Zad, 1993, p. 4). Unique and artistic content can be read as "cable" programming. This type of content had "critical acclaim" and did not pander to a mass audience and high ratings. Cable, or more specifically Bravo, was literally "too good for" television. Here "television" means broadcast networks. The way *TV Too Good For TV* was marketed reinforced Bravo's brand identity as a highbrow arts network. In fact, the title and orientation for Bravo's *TV Too Good For TV* was grounded in a simplistic binary between popular and elite programming. As with HBO's well know slogan, "It's not TV, It's HBO," access and choice were privileged in Bravo's branding effort (Lotz, 2007b). Bravo, like HBO, was engaging in para-television branding. Both networks relied on programming choices with mainstream societal recognition to distinguish themselves from commercial broadcasting (Pepper, 2010).

*Twin Peaks* can be seen as a hallmark of the tensions Bravo, along with cultural arts cable networks (e.g. AMC, A&E, and Discovery), negotiated in the 1990s. On the one hand, the aforementioned cable networks need to please long-standing viewers of a basic subscription service with limited commercial interruptions. From this perspective, the value of *Twin Peaks* presumably came

from the show's critical acclaim and its cancelation due to low ratings. On the other hand, audience commodification was playing a more prominent role for these cultural arts cable networks, and it was necessary to please the advertising clients who were providing what was increasingly becoming the primary source of revenue. From this perspective, despite its short run on ABC, *Twin Peaks* was more commercial than the content Bravo had been known for up until this point. This allowed Bravo to please the clients it had at this point in time, and to increase its long-term marketability.

Bravo's reliance on *Twin Peaks* to inaugurate the *TV Too Good For TV* showcase exemplifies a salient contradiction between brand identity and the program content that Bravo started to air in the early 1990s. Bravo's brand identity was grounded in the overt rejection of the commercial interests that characterized mass broadcasting. As Bravo turned toward program content with more popular appeal, which in some instances originally aired on the very broadcast networks Bravo castigated to establish its brand identity, the incompatibility of these two opposing forces became more apparent. In the next section, I turn to *The Awful Truth* to examine a similar contradiction in an original program aired on Bravo.

### ***The Awful Truth: Mocking the Status Quo***

In the 1990s television content that mocked and exploited the status quo arose as a programming staple across various niche cable networks. From *South Park* and *The Simpsons*, to *The Daily Show* and *The Awful Truth*, satire became a

prominent theme in cable television. Satire critiques social conventions through judgment and aggression. Laughter is a possible outcome of satire. Still, Gray, Jones, & Thompson (2009) argue that laughter is not “a necessary component or distinguishing feature of satire” (p. 13), and as we will see later this has important implications for broadcast networks. Satire and parody are seen as synonymous in everyday vernacular. Still, these two forms of humor have important differences. Parody exploits and attacks aesthetic conventions tied to the format and form of a specific text or genre, whereas satire examines social conventions (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). Parody and satire are often found together. For example, *The Daily Show* mocks the aesthetic conventions commonly associated with news programming, as well as the social conventions associated with a typical news anchor.

The previously mentioned series *The Awful Truth* relied on host Michael Moore to satirize and parody newsmagazine programming. This signature series aired on Bravo in the late 1990s. Signature programming is originally produced content that has a direct appeal to core advertisers and the target audience for any given network (Mullen, 2003). *The Awful Truth*, a joint endeavor co-financed by the BCC and Bravo, was a signature program produced to air on Bravo, although it had previously aired as *TV Nation* on NBC (1994) and Fox (1995). Following its cancellation on these two broadcast networks, *TV Nation* was reformulated and renamed (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009).

*The Awful Truth* aired for two seasons (1999 – 2000) on Bravo. The documentary format was a cost-effective model – typically, documentaries are

“only a fraction of the cost of fictional TV” (Chris, 2007, p. 143) – that fit within the parameters of Bravo’s highbrow arts programming. Moore’s attention to social activism and his questioning of the status quo catered to the intellectual acumen of Bravo’s audience demographic. Classified as a “left-wing populist program” that relied on biting documentary vignettes (Jones, 2005, p. 5), *The Awful Truth* featured a combination of politics and entertainment that offered liberal intellectuals with “good taste” a viable outlet for bourgeois consumer citizenship (Miller, 2007).

The combination of entertainment and politics in shows like *The Awful Truth* and *The Daily Show* is a new pattern in the late-twentieth-century television referred to as “entertaining politics” (Jones, 2005). Jeffery Jones (2005) argues that this term has two meanings. First, it indicates the desire and/or willingness of audiences, producers, and politicians to use politics to entertain in creative new ways. Second, the term evokes the pleasurable aspects of politics. Politics did not have to be “the equivalent of swallowing bitter medicine” (Jones, 2005, p. 9). Quite the contrary, “audiences were receptive to (if not hungry for)” exposure to accessible and pleasurable programming that presented this “naturally interesting, dramatic, strange, unpredictable, frustrating, and downright hilarious” field of policy, power, and government in engaging and meaningful ways (Jones, 2005, p. 9).

In the weekly series *The Awful Truth*, Moore took an unscripted and stealth-like approach to interviewing public figures that was unpredictable, pleasurable, accessible, and humorous. According to *New York Times* journalist Caryn James



(1999), “Moore brashly explodes the documentary form in ‘The Awful Truth’ on Bravo, confronting corporate executives as he blends television with social activism” (p. 1). In alignment with James, media scholar Jonathan Gray (2009) argues that Moore successfully caught his victims with guerrilla interviewing tactics that provided rare moments of revelation. According to Gray (2009), Moore’s interviewing techniques not only had the “power to challenge” the public image of the individual being interviewed, these techniques also launched “a parodic-satiric attack on journalism’s velvet glove treatment of public figures” (Gray, 2009, p. 159).

Clearly *The Awful Truth* offered audiences a new type of access to public figures. Yet this access was limited only to consumer citizens with the economic means to afford basic cable and was therefore not universally accessible. Granted, *The Awful Truth* started on network television. *Still*, the biting satire found in *The Awful Truth* aligned more readily with cable’s reliance on niche commodification and stratified access to program content. This may be because network television is less willing to take risks with satirical content. As previously mentioned, satire does not have to be funny. Satire can alienate audiences, and the expectations a broadcast network has for audience share tend to be higher than those of a cable network. The satire in *The Awful Truth* offered the Bravo brand a way to stand out in the emerging postnetwork television landscape; it provided a unique perspective and distinct appeal (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009). In fact, *New York Times* Journalist Caryn James (1999) situated Moore’s form of entertaining politics amongst a handful of cable series that spoke to public exhaustion with banal

network programming. From *The Awful Truth* and *Strangers With Candy*, to *The Tom Green Show*, *Celebrity Death Match*, and *The Upright Citizens Brigade*, cable television evidenced “the true signs of television life” in the late 1990s (James, 1999, p. 1). James also lauded the aforementioned cable series for their ability to mock and comically exploit “stale television forms” and present a more honest “view of the world” (1999, p. 1). This presumption has important significance given the role authenticity and reality TV come to play in the digital media landscape in the early twenty-first century.

In alignment with James (1999), journalists for *The Washington Post* and *San Diego Union Tribune* highlighted the unique and honest access to reality offered in *The Awful Truth*. Honest access in this context meant Bravo refrained from censorship (De Moraes, 1999a; Turegano, 1999). In particular, Lisa De Moraes highlighted that both NBC and Fox canceled *TV Nation*, Moore’s previous series. Moreover, together these two broadcast networks (Fox and NBC) censored “five or six pieces” (1999a, p. 9). Now, Moore was happy to be working in a “censorship free environment” (De Moraes, 1999a). De Moraes’ commentary suggests that only broadcast networks censor content.

Granted, cable networks do have more leeway when it comes to government regulation of sexually explicit, violent, and/or vulgar content. Yet, government regulations are not the only form of censorship. Advertising and cultural context are to additional reasons program distribution outlets engage in censorship, and this happens on cable and broadcast television. Ironically, in June 1999 Bravo censored the *Teen Sniper School* segment of *The Awful Truth* following

the massacre at Columbine High School (De Moraes, 1999b). In “Bravo Pulls Gun Segment From Michael Moore Show,” journalist Lisa De Moraes (1999b) noted that a four-minute segment was pulled by Bravo in light of the school shooting. In an effort not to be perceived as a censor, a representative interviewed for the article stated that “after some times goes by, the original intent of the satire will be more clear to viewers” (De Moraes, 1999b, p. 7). It is clear that Moore’s satirical take on school violence, immediately following the devastating events at Columbine, concerned Bravo executives. While we do not know why this was the case, concerns about tarnishing Bravo’s brand identity and/or the cable network losing advertisers are two plausible reasons.

In hindsight, *The Awful Truth* can be seen as a cultural precursor to the unscripted programming Bravo comes to be known for in the twenty-first century. Bravo’s “honest” and “uncensored” access to reality has a distant resemblance to the Bravo we know today. Another characteristic that links *The Awful Truth* to Bravo’s signature programming in the twenty-first century is humor. Through its use of parody and satire, *The Awful Truth* sought to recontextualize discourse across interconnected texts, offering “‘new’ ways to make sense of ‘old’ texts or genres” (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 18). In contrast, the ironic representations found in Bravo’s unscripted programming in the twenty-first century do not criticize and resituate. Instead, the ironic excess mildly mocks gender and consumer culture through a self-conscious, abrasive, and patently obvious approach to lifestyle.

*The Awful Truth* was part of a new pattern in the late twentieth century, entertaining politics (Jones, 2005). Forms of entertaining politics were available on cable (e.g. *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central) and broadcast networks (e.g. NBC's *The West Wing* and Fox's *The Simpsons*) in the 1990s. Still, the biting reflection and reevaluation offered by news parodies like *The Awful Truth* and *The Daily Show* required basic cable (Jones, 2005). This factor does not negate the civic value of these two shows. Nonetheless, it does foreground how the neoliberal political economic climate in the digital media landscape influenced access to news parodies. Basic cable's attention to niche audiences offered stratified access to specific forms of entertaining politics. *The Awful Truth* and *The Daily Show* – two shows that mock the status quo through their exploitations of social conventions and the aesthetic conventions of television news – were available to consumer citizens who paid for basic cable, and thereby received access to Bravo and Comedy Central, respectively. To be a “better citizen” in this context meant “good taste” in a neoliberal climate driven by niche cultural commodification and “free choice via consumer preference” (Miller, 2007, p. 8).

Moreover, as we saw with *The Awful Truth*, the difference in government regulation of content for cable and broadcast networks did not make basic cable a program distribution route immune from censorship. Quite the contrary, commercial interests serve as an alternative form of institutional censorship that is present in advertising-supported mediums like basic cable. In particular, it seems more than likely that Bravo's censorship of the *Teen Sniper School* segment was linked to the cable network's reliance on advertising. Overall, commercial

imperatives are becoming increasingly important to Bravo throughout the 1990s. In the next section, we examine Bravo's concerted effort to make the arts more marketable on TV and beyond.

### **From "Highbrow Arts Programming" to "Arts Programming"**

Bravo and AMC were sister networks in the 1990s, the former known for foreign films the latter for classic Hollywood films. The two Cablevision networks were both housed in the company's Rainbow Programming subsidiary. From a market-based perspective, AMC was better situated than Bravo due to its mainstream appeal. AMC did well across the country, even in small markets. In contrast, Bravo did not fare well in smaller markets that were less attuned to highbrow arts programming (Leventhal, 1995). In the realm of commercial viability, AMC was seeking ways to capitalize on the classic Hollywood niche. In particular, "video branding possibilities" were being considered (Leventhal, 1995, p. 30). Alternatively, Bravo lacked AMC's various merchandising opportunities. Despite Bravo's limitations, executives at Rainbow Programming believed there was a "solid niche" for Bravo's highbrow arts programming. The most pressing concern was Bravo's marketability, as AMC had a level of mainstream appeal that was patently absent at Bravo (Leventhal, 1995).

In the 1990s, Bravo faced the same problem as PBS, limited popular appeal. PBS responded with a "self-conscious institutional attempt" to frame their network "in more popular terms that could not be accused of cultural elitism" (Ouellette, 1998, p. 370), and Bravo adopted a similar strategy. For Bravo, that meant connecting viewers to the arts. In July 1996, Bravo launched a campaign with the

slogan “Art that goes with your couch.”<sup>73</sup> The campaign to some degree attempted to shed the “highbrow” nature of Bravo’s programming model, while the humor aimed to attract viewers by cultivating their “good taste” as bourgeois consumer citizens (Miller, 2007). As we will see, the campaign and its promotional spots did not disavow Bravo’s highbrow status but instead illustrated Bravo’s conflicted approach to the cultural arts as the network moved toward commercial programming in 1990s.

The first promotional spot attempted to connect “less culturally oriented” viewers to the arts, and it tended to challenge Bravo’s brand identity as a highbrow arts programmer (Leventhal, 1995, p. 30). In this promotional spot a couple watched a foreign film on Bravo. The couple was extremely engrossed in the movie, and their intense level of immersion literally transported them into the French film. To signify this, the screen transitioned from color to black and white. At this point, the couple – now speaking French with English subtitles – was literally immersed in the feel and look of the French film (“Life Imitates Art in New Campaign,” 1996). Then, the spot cut to the Bravo logo set against a colorful background, and the man said, “Funny, I flunked French in high school” (“Life Imitates Art in New Campaign,” 1996, para. 2).

From this perspective, Bravo did not air disconnected and elitist highbrow programming that only appealed to bourgeois consumer citizens. Instead, Bravo’s foreign films transported viewers to exciting and interesting places from the privacy of their comfortable suburban couches. Moreover, the exaggerated shift in

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<sup>73</sup> Just a year prior PBS promoted its network with “two catchy slogans: ‘TV for Real People,’ and ‘If We Don’t Do It, Who Will?’” (Ouellette, 1998, p. 370).

intellectual capability purportedly needed to enjoy highbrow arts programming – a man that “flunked French in high school” becomes so engrossed and engaged in Bravo’s French film that he is literally transported into the film aesthetic – is used to satirize the elitist presumption that foreign films are only accessible to viewers with high levels of economic and cultural capital (“Life Imitates Art in New Campaign,” 1996, para. 2).<sup>74</sup> Together, theatrical engagement and humor were used to situate Bravo’s foreign films as an accessible form of art for mainstream Americans. In particular, the TV viewing experience presented aligns with the role “movement and portability” has played in how television is conceptualized in American society (Spigel, 2001). Through theatrical engagement, the couple aesthetically experienced a new country. In the promotional spot, televised art was situated as an active form of entertainment that offered private mobility for mainstream Americans.

The second promotional spot catered more to elite viewers and tended to reinforce Bravo’s highbrow identity. The main interaction in this spot occurred between a mother and her two children. As the two young children, a brother and sister watched Bravo, not Saturday morning cartoons, viewers are given a clear indication of the intellectual acumen possessed by these children. This became more apparent when the boy taunted his sister by calling her a “neo-fatalist.” The mother responded to the taunt from another room by yelling, “Don’t make me

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<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, it is reasonable to argue that the humor in the promotional spot could also appeal to bourgeois viewers who see their interest in foreign films as a sign of intellectual superiority. For example, viewers with high levels of economic and cultural capital could situate the scenario in the promotional spot as a middle class couples “futile” attempt at “cultural sophistication.” In this instance bourgeois viewers may laugh at the “intellectually inferior” middle class couple and see the scenario as a confirmation that mainstream viewers lack the educational and cultural sophistication to truly appreciate foreign films.

come in there and prove your free will” (“Life Imitates Art in New Campaign,” 1996, para. 2). In this instance, irony was used to suggest the intellectual superiority of Bravo viewers. Most notably, the male child in the promotional spot used the term “neo-fatalism,” a philosophical concept that has little mainstream use amongst adults, let alone children. Given that neo-fatalists refute the existence of free will, when the mom responded with, “Don’t make me come in there and prove your free will,” viewers were exposed to witty intellectual banter between two young children and their mom (“Life Imitates Art in New Campaign,” 1996, para. 2). The son’s use of an obscure term combined with the mother’s response, was most likely humorous for viewers familiar with the meaning of neo-fatalism. Of course, educational privilege let viewers in on the joke.<sup>75</sup>

The two promotional spots discussed above illustrate the role humor played as Bravo attempted to navigate a transition to a more mainstream audience. The “Art that goes with your couch” promotional campaign demonstrates that Bravo executives were aware of the limitations of highbrow arts programming and wanted to generate popular appeal for Bravo’s content. In fact, Bravo President Kathleen Dore commented on the challenges Bravo faced as an arts programmer in the mid 1990s. As Dore noted in *The New York Times*,

Generally, the arts have had a tough time on television, and it’s tricky to program the arts on television, so we’re always looking for a way that says, this is something different, this is something unique, the arts

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<sup>75</sup> Still, mainstream viewers without the necessary cultural capital could also find this scenario humorous. From the young boys unexpected use of an unknown term, to the mothers peculiar response, mainstream viewers unfamiliar with the meaning of neo-fatalism may find the over the top nature of the intellectual scenario humorous. In fact, a more mainstream audience may read the promotional spot as a self-conscious satirical plug by the cable network at its highbrow status.



are not stuffy and not necessarily always classical. (Barron, 1996, p. 67)

The above excerpt highlights Bravo's concerted effort to foreground "arts programming," as opposed to "highbrow arts programming." As we know, highbrow arts programming has grounded Bravo's brand identity since its inception in the 1980s. Given the common association between bourgeois elites disconnected from popular culture and highbrow arts programming, the term "arts programming" offered a way to appeal to a more mainstream audience.

### **Connecting Viewers to the Arts**

As we saw in the last section, executives made a concerted effort to increase the mainstream appeal associated with Bravo's brand identity via the "Art that goes with your couch" promotional campaign. Signature programming was another way Bravo sought to leave behind stuffy and classical highbrow arts programming (Barron, 1996). Hosted by James Lipton, *Inside the Actors Studio*<sup>76</sup> was a new signature program that began airing on Bravo in 1994. As an important stepping-stone to Bravo's commercial metamorphosis that did not get axed when NBC bought Bravo in 2002, *Inside the Actors Studio* has served as a visible and prestigious marketing platform for the theater/motion picture industries. For nineteen seasons *Inside the Actors Studio* has purportedly provided viewers access into the personal and professional lives of A-List celebrities. The development of

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<sup>76</sup> Popular culture knowledge about *Inside the Actors Studio* may lead many people to think that the Actors Studio started with Bravo and James Lipton. In reality however, the Actors Studio is a New York based nonprofit founded in 1947 by Elia Kazan, Robert Lewis and Cheryl Crawford as a professional forum for theater artists to hone their craft via Group Theatre work. After twenty-five plus years, the Actors Studio founded a Master of Fine Arts program 1994 (Manolikakis, n.d.).

*Inside the Actors Studio* marked an important point in Bravo's historical trajectory for many reasons.

First, *Inside the Actors Studio* offered a new way for Bravo to connect viewers to the arts. Second, when *Inside the Actors Studio* was released, it relied on specific programming characteristics that aligned with the impending turn toward reality television in the beginning of the twenty-first century: (1) hand-held cameras and editing; (2) insight into the personal and professional lives of celebrities; and (3) an aura of authenticity. Similarly, the third reason I highlight this moment in Bravo's historical trajectory overlaps with the cultural turn toward reality programming. More specifically, *Inside the Actors Studio* – a non-fictional series that has aired for nineteen seasons on Bravo – spanned Bravo's transition from a niche cable network driven by highbrow arts programming (1980s and 1990s) to a niche cable network driven by reality television (2000s). Here, I examine the role that hand-held cameras and editing, insight into the personal and professional lives of celebrities, and an aura of authenticity played for *Inside the Actors Studio* in the 1990s. I also situate *Inside the Actors Studio* via scholarly research, and compare/contrast how these three programming traits were navigated by Bravo in two different decades, one characterized by highbrow arts programming (1990s) and the other by reality television programming grounded in branded entertainment and affluent lifestyle (2000s).

Since its inception, television has navigated tensions between public and private space. In fact, the television medium offered a new way to expose viewers to entertainment in the privacy of their own homes. As a medium that offered

access to cultural entertainment grounded in moving imagery within the domestic space of family life, television was seen as a way to reinforce family values in postwar America (Spigel, 1992). Simultaneously, the medium also evoked fear. Most notably, television's association with military surveillance and reconnaissance in World War II, as well as the uncertainty surrounding the presence of an intimidating technological device in the homes of private citizens, contradicted the medium's aura of unity, closeness, and familial values (Spigel, 1992). Despite television's contradictions, its instantaneous transmission of recorded content, possibly transmitted live, offered the ability to feel physically close to inaccessible public figures and exotic people/locations on a private screen situated within the home environment (Berenstein, 2002).

Artists from the theater and motion picture industries were the inaccessible public figures *Inside the Actors Studio* used to connect viewers to the arts in the 1990s. As a non-fictional form of programming content grounded in an interview format, *Inside the Actors Studio* capitalized on hand-held cameras and editing to connect viewers to the arts. Indeed, hand-held cameras are of the utmost importance to *Inside the Actors Studio*. The significance of hand-held cameras does not come from the quantitative presence of these types of shots when an episode of *Inside the Actors Studio* is aired. To the contrary, shots from hand-held cameras are much less frequent when compared with footage from the studio camera. Instead, shots from hand-held cameras matter because of what they signify when they are present. Hand-held cameras are used strategically in the filming of *Inside the Actors Studio*. Shots from this flexible recording technology increase the

immediacy, liveness, and physical proximity associated with the television viewing experience. When Paul Newman blocked a scene from *The Verdict* with a female acting student he pulled out of the audience, hand-held cameras were there to “capture the look on her face, rehearsing as it were, with Paul Newman” (Barron, 1996, p. 67). This comment, made by Bravo president Kathleen Dore in *The New York Times*, highlights the value associated with recording a seemingly natural celebrity encounter. Dore’s quote suggests this experience had the utmost value for a specific reason, the presence of iconic Hollywood star Paul Neman. From Dore’s perspective, the audience member – a student studying the craft of acting – was star struck by the interaction. This incident offered viewers at home an interaction between an average person and Paul Newman grounded in immediacy, liveness, and physical proximity. Fortunately, a hand-held camera was present to capture this brush with celebrity.

In addition to hand-held cameras, editing is another way the early seasons of *Inside the Actors Studio* resemble reality television. As with the non-fictional content that characterizes the 2000s, *Inside the Actors Studio* relied on hours of footage that was edited to fit an hour time slot (Barron, 1996). Despite its veil of spontaneity, *Inside the Actors Studio* was highly produced non-fictional content. Yet, *Inside the Actors Studio* lacked slick production conventions. Instead, low production value was deployed. This tactic intentionally or unintentionally gave the show an aura of authenticity (Andrejevic, 2004), as did personal and professional disclosures from private celebrities like Paul Newman, Neil Simon, and Stephen Sondheim.

In the mid-1990s, prior to the onslaught of reality television, *Inside the Actors Studio*'s purportedly offered viewers access into the personal and professional lives of entertainers. Paul Newman, a guarded Hollywood star, provided viewers insight into his private life with Joanne Woodward and his professional training as an actor. From his confession that acting was not easy for him, to his resentment of actors "like his wife Joanne Woodward" who "are instinctive and intuitive," Newman's insecurities personalized the star as he talked "easily about himself and his work" (O'Conner, 1995a, p. 18). Simultaneously, "bits of film lore" gave a glance inside Newman's experiences in Hollywood. For example, viewers learned that when Newman was cast for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, he was told he was "playing opposite Marlon" (O'Conner, 1995a, p. 18). Yet when that changed right before filming he got to work with Robert Redford.

Neil Simon, another celebrity protective of his privacy, was interviewed on *Inside the Actors Studio* in the mid-1990s. While Simon looked as if "talking about his work is not his favorite thing to do," the playwright/entertainer still allowed viewers to peek into his personal/professional life (Shales, 1995, p. 1). For example, still photos from Simon's plays and personal life were shown, and details regarding Walter Matthau's role in *The Odd Couple* were discussed. In relation to the latter, Simon noted how Matthau attempted to get a line removed while the play was in rehearsal, and he shared that the actor initially "saw himself not as bombastic Oscar Madison but rather as fussybudgety Felix Unger" (Shales, 1995, p. 1).

Finally, Stephen Sondheim, a “reclusive lyricist and composer,” sat “somewhat squirmingly” for his interview with James Lipton (O’Conner, 1995b, p. 17). Nonetheless, as with Paul Newman and Neil Simon, Sondheim offered insight into formative personal and professional experiences. For example, Sondheim revealed that his mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II, “mercilessly criticized” his first composing effort. The harsh criticism was situated as a formidable experience for the composer, who was fifteen at the time. Through this disclosure, viewers are given access to how Sondheim was taught lessons in the basics by his esteemed mentor. The main lesson Sondheim took away was “the power of a single word and the ability of music to get the word to explode” (O’Conner, 1995b, p. 17).

Overall, the first season of *Inside the Actors Studio* offered average Americans a different type of access to artists. Through selected footage from Lipton’s interviews, viewers were purportedly given authentic access to the reclusive lives of stars like Paul Newman, Neil Simon, and Stephen Sondheim. Elites from Hollywood and New York were humanized as they disclosed details from their personal and professional lives to Lipton on *Inside the Actors Studio*. Authentic access to the personal and professional lives of writers, directors, and actors from theater and film was deemed to have great value. In fact, *Inside the Actors Studio* was situated as a form of media that refused to mediate because its host relied on a non-antagonistic style and a nuanced and distanced form of inquiry (Rothenberg, 1999, p. 34).<sup>77</sup> The aura of authenticity surrounding *Inside*

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<sup>77</sup> *Larry King Live* and *In Style* magazine “are breezy, almost anti-intellectual – an open door to the most straight-forward superficialities, whether a movie star’s living room or a politician’s public positions” (Rothenberg, 1999, p. 34). *In Style* offers access to closets and homes of celebrities, while *Larry King*

*the Actors Studio* in the late 1990s can be seen as a signal of things to come for Bravo specifically, and the digital media landscape writ large.

Today, the concerted effort being made to record an interaction between a Hollywood celebrity with widespread commercial appeal and an average audience participant enamored by contact with an iconic public figure comes as no surprise. Still in the late 1990s, *Inside the Actors Studio* – a harbinger of the reality television onslaught to come in the twenty-first century – recorded seemingly spontaneous interactions with hand-held cameras. These interactions within the “intimacy” of the television medium helped to demystify Hollywood celebrity for the home viewing audience (Andrejevic, 2004). Moreover, “authentic interactions,” or teaching opportunities between well-known Hollywood icons and struggling students, highlight the dual role art and commerce have played, and continue to play, for *Inside the Actors Studio*.

The willingness of well-know celebrities with significant exchange value to interact with students committed to learning the craft of acting has allowed *Inside the Actors Studio* to exceed its peers in the talk show genre (Barron, 1996). Despite its commercial appeal as a venue for branded entertainment, host James Lipton privileges the art of acting by situating *Inside the Actors Studio* as a “classroom” composed of theater and film students seeking to learn an art form (Esch, 2007). Ultimately, Lipton’s efforts to disavow the commodification of the New York

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“has made a virtue of his lack of preparation in order to pursue the obvious questions his audience might be asking” (Rothenberg, 1999, p. 34). Alternatively, the hosts for *Book Notes* and *Inside the Actor’s Studio* prepare deeply. Still this is “only to draw the subject’s own interpretation of a work of career, not to goad an emotional ‘gotcha’ in the manner of a Barbara Walters or Diane Sawyer” (Rothenberg, 1999, p. 34).

theater industry and the Hollywood film industry stands in stark contrast to the role *Inside the Actors Studio* has played, and continues to play, as a marketing platform that bridges art and commerce for Bravo viewers via purportedly authentic interactions with iconic celebrities. Scholarly research offers further insight into how *Inside the Actors Studio* has attempted to navigate the tensions between art and commerce.

Since its inception, *Inside the Actors Studio* has “won several cable industry awards for best talk show” (Esch, 2007, p. 46). While classified as a talk show in trade industry publications and the mainstream press, *Inside the Actors Studio* eschews elements typically associated with this genre. The absence of repetitive, forced encounters between Lipton and a film/theater artist promoting a new film serves as one way *Inside the Actors Studio* differs from the talk show genre. Media scholar Kevin Esch (2007) suggests that this feature preserves artistic prosperity, as guests are only able to make one contribution to this esteemed historical archive.

Lipton’s treatment of guests and his performance as host are two additional ways the host attempts to discount the role commerce plays in the Hollywood film industry, the New York theater industry, and *Inside the Actors Studio*. First, guests are not situated as commodities available for purchase via film/theater release, merchandising, and licensing. To the contrary, the role commodification plays in the production, distribution, and circulation of the well-branded films, plays, and celebrities is intentionally or unwittingly ignored. Lipton privileges the artistic endeavors of his guests and patently avoids the role marketing plays in the lives of



his interviewees (Esch, 2007). From Lipton's perspective, *Inside the Actors Studio* solely serves as an educational forum devoted to the craft of acting.

Similarly, Lipton's performance as host attempts to divorce *Inside the Actors Studio* from the commodification commonly associated with New York Theater and Hollywood film. Lipton's approach to interviewing, and his reverence for his guests and their respective art forms, highlights *Inside the Actors Studio's* contentious relationship with authenticity. For example, in 2001 *New York Times* journalist Chris Hedges (2001) noted how Lipton's style as an interviewer included no interruptions in a criticism-free environment that passed over artistic failures. Similarly, media scholar Kevin Esch's (2007) commentary on Lipton's interviews highlighted the reverence the host affords to his guests. Most notably, Esch (2007) argues that the undue flattery Lipton showers on guests coincides with the reverence our culture typically holds for the deceased.

Guest selection, a nostalgic vision of celebrities and their respective arts, and host performance all work together to cement the mediated form of authenticity offered in *Inside the Actors Studio*. *Inside the Actors Studio* is important because it exemplifies important trends in the digital media landscape and foreshadows the reality television content Bravo becomes known for in the 2000s. First, we find that *Inside the Actors Studio* was on the cusp of the cultural turn toward reality programming in the realm of production. Most notably, reliance on hand-held cameras and editing hours of footage to create serious drama are two hallmarks of the non-fictional programming explosion in the early twenty-first century (Andrejevic, 2004). These production traits are instrumental to the

docudramas Bravo airs in the 2000s. Unlike *Inside the Actors Studio*, slick production grounded in compelling graphic, fast cuts, and a glossy finish characterize the majority of Bravo's signature content in the 2000s.

Insight into the personal and professional lives of celebrities also plays a central role in the signature content Bravo becomes known for in the 2000s, although the manifestation of this theme has a notable difference. While *Inside the Actors Studio* relies on seemingly candid conversations with esteemed stars of film and theater, Bravo's signature programming in the 2000s exploits a democratized form of reality television that uses average people to manufacture "celebrity grade-humans" (Andrejevic, 2004). The common themes of celebrity lifestyle and authenticity are apparent in both instances.

This leads to the final theme, authenticity. In the twenty-first century digital media landscape, we find a continual search for authenticity. From technologies like Facebook and Twitter, to the rise of the practice of lifecasting and the ubiquity of reality television, there is a pronounced interest in connecting to something real and authentic. In the 1990s, *Inside the Actors Studio* purportedly offered authentic access into the "real lives" of writers, directors, and actors from theater and film. In actuality, this cultural precursor to celebrity-based reality TV offered a mediated form of authenticity that humanized elite cultural icons (Andrejevic, 2004) in a highbrow marketing venue that aimed to disavow the commercial interests that ground American film and theater (Esch, 2007).

As we know, *Inside the Actors Studio* faired Bravo's transition to a reality television format, and in the 2000s the show and its host are well branded

commodities. From emphatic pronunciation and absurd flattery, to French phrases, portentous pauses, and blank stares, Lipton's performance as host has situated him as a pretentious public figure solely interested in the craft of acting (Hedges, 2001; Esch, 2007). Will Ferrell's unflattering caricature of Lipton on *Saturday Night Live* signifies the host's status as an eccentric and polarizing figure (Esch, 2007). In that vein, textual discourse surrounding *Inside the Actors Studio* relies on humor to satirize the faux authenticity that characterizes the show.

Despite this, *Inside the Actors Studio* "struggles to preserve a high-minded mythology of film acting, exemplified by the original Actors Studio and challenged by the consumerist priorities of the late capitalist Hollywood industry" (Esch, 2007, p. 45). Interestingly, this occurs on a cable network characterized by signature programming grounded in an ironic take on consumer culture that unequivocally mocks and affirms nouveau riche consumer citizenship. In fact, the aura of authenticity surrounding Bravo's original content in the 2000s comes from the network's over-the-top attention to branded entertainment and affluent lifestyle. Later chapters will delve into this in more detail. For now, we turn to shifts underway at Rainbow Programming that continue to move Bravo away from highbrow arts programming.

### **Synergy, Spin-Offs, and Bravo's Move Away From Niche Films**

As we have seen, in the mid-to-late 1990s Bravo made pertinent shifts in programming, advertising, and marketing. In particular, *Inside the Actors Studio* demonstrates how Bravo was moving away from highbrow arts programming and attempting to attain mainstream commercial appeal. The Independent Film

Channel (IFC) and World Cinema are two niche movie networks founded by Rainbow Programming in the 1990s, the former in 1994 and the later in 1997. Both are important to Bravo's move away from niche independent and foreign films, respectively. Here I examine the role Bravo played in launching IFC and World Cinema, and I assess how these two film channels helped to set the stage for Bravo's birth as a basic cable network that embraced a fully supported advertising format at the end of the 1990s.

When sister network IFC was launched in 1994, Rainbow Programming capitalized on Bravo's ubiquity as a venue for independent films. Bravo – a cable network with limited advertising and reliant upon niche movies and documentaries – was situated as the network that “created the Independent Film Channel” (Dempsey, 1994, p. 21). Bravo not only created IFC; it was also used as a venue to “incubate” the film channel through a weekly programming slot that aired prior to the launch of the new independent film network. By the time World Cinema was announced in 1997, Bravo still previewed IFC and its content on Friday nights (“Bravo Networks Announce,” 1997). World Cinema was afforded the same valuable marketing platform, as Bravo showcased World Cinema and its content on Mondays each week until the network was launched (“Bravo Networks Announce,” 1997).

IFC and World Cinema are indicative of the central role synergy and branding played in the television industry in the late 1990s, whereas Bravo's role in launching these two movie channels illustrates that the cultural arts cable network had enough brand name recognition to be used as a synergistic marketing

tool for two Rainbow Programming spinoff ventures. Most notably, when World Cinema's launch was announced in 1997, it came from "The Bravo Networks." The Bravo Networks, as defined in the press release, comprised Bravo, IFC, Bravo International, Next Wave Films and IFC Productions ("Bravo Networks Announce," 1997). Here we find Bravo's brand identity being used to package two film production entities and a group of cable networks.

Bravo's cultural recognition in the realm of niche films was solid enough for the cable network's brand identity to be used as a launching pad for IFC (1994) and World Cinema (1997). Still, industry discourse made a concerted effort to contrast the differences between Bravo and these two niche film networks. IFC was characterized as a network that delved deeper into foreign and classic films than Bravo (Dempsey, 1994). Similarly, World Cinema surpassed Bravo via its sole devotion to international films twenty-four hours a day ("Bravo Networks Announce," 1997). As is evident above, both IFC and World Cinema relied on a much more tightly focused niche than Bravo. There was also another benefit IFC offered "tougher" uncut versions of independent films (Dempsey, 1994), while World Cinema aired uncut and commercial-free films that maintained the chic and savoir-faire nature of international film ("Bravo Networks Announce," 1997).

In the 1990s IFC and World Cinema were marketed for their highly specialized niche and commercial-free viewing context, two elements Bravo was moving away from as it sought to carefully navigate the tensions between mass and niche programming in an effort to produce a commercially viable audience that appealed to advertisers. At this point in time, Bravo was a part of an expanded

basic cable package like USA, CNN and ESPN. Since IFC and World Cinema were not a part of expanded basic cable these networks did not have to deal with advertising restraints tied to violence and sex (Dempsey, 1994). The development of the IFC and World Cinema – two premium film channels unencumbered by advertising, which aired films uncut and without commercial interruption – made Bravo’s niche film specialization a glaring redundancy in the cable network offerings for Rainbow Programming. Given that Bravo executives believed the cable network needed more mainstream appeal, it seems more than likely that IFC and World Cinema were created to fill the void that would develop as Bravo transitioned to a new programming format.

Not satisfied with program sponsorship, Bravo moved to a full commercial format at the end of the 1990s. The new reliance on advertising meant Bravo needed to be more attuned to marketing. Now, Bravo’s format and commercials needed to signal to viewers if and how they fit in and what they could “buy or do to keep fitting in” (Turow, 1997). From this perspective, while independent/foreign-language films fared remarkably well on Bravo,<sup>78</sup> they lacked commercial viability, something that was important to Bravo in the mid-to-late 1990s. It seems likely that Rainbow executives used IFC and World Cinema to fill a specialized niche that did not attract the right amount and/or kind of people advertisers sought (Mullen,

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<sup>78</sup> For example, foreign-language films were “in the top percentiles of income, professional/managerial and educational categories” according to Nielsen research (“Bravo Networks Announce,” 1997, para. 9). In fact, “breakthrough titles,” such as *Like Water For Chocolate*, drew a dedicated audience. These types of films allowed Bravo to pull in ratings of .7/.8, a number that was double the national Nielsen rating Bravo averaged at this point in time (“Bravo Networks Announce,” 1997).

2003).<sup>79</sup> In contrast, Bravo aligned with the needs of advertisers to avoid fading away.

### **Brand Identity and Basic Cable in the 1990s**

In the 1990s advertising-supported cable networks were struggling to balance two overlapping audiences. On the one hand, basic cable networks sought to reach some derivation of the broad demographic commonly associated with broadcast television. Here the goal was to meet the needs of major advertisers that wanted to pay a low cost per thousand for a large audience (Turow, 1997). On the other hand, there was attention to a narrowcast audience interested in the kind of subject matter that aired on basic cable. The super core audience “added a more targeted sense of age, gender, income, even race than the broadcast networks would claim” (Turow, 1997, p. 113). This audience strategy had broader goals tied to programming financing and brand identity. In particular, a carefully crafted brand identity offered the opportunity to stand out in the basic cable landscape. Three components were used to craft this brand identity: promotion, reruns, and signature shows. Here I trace the role promotion, reruns, and signature shows played in Bravo’s conflicted brand identity in the 1990s.

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<sup>79</sup> IFC and World Cinema were not the only two niche film channels launched in the mid-to-late 1990s, there was also The Sundance Film Channel and Ovation. The Sundance Film Channel partnered Showtime and Robert Redford. Sundance launched in 1995, at that point in time Showtime has over 300 films titles (e.g. *Four Weddings and A Funeral*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, and *Orlando*) to air on the new independent film channel (Carter, 1995). The difference between channels like IFC and Sundance, as opposed Bravo, TMC, and AMC, is that the former channels charge a subscribe fee that enables them to run more provocative movies, uncut, and without commercial interruption (Dempsey, 1995). Ovation came a year later. Ovation was not billed as a niche film channel it was billed as an “arts and culture cable network” that offered a high-octane and highbrow slate (Pearce, 1996, para. 4). The cultural network’s investors included companies like The New York Times Co. and Time Warner Cable. In April 1996 when Ovation launched its closest predecessors were Bravo and A&E. Two cable networks that “have both veered towards more popular mass market programs when times got tough” (Pearce, 1996, para. 10).

As we have seen, Bravo relied on promotional activities during this decade to begin to craft a new brand identity. The promotional spots from the “Art that goes with your couch” campaign discussed earlier speak to one way that Bravo attempted to market itself to a mainstream and super core audience (Turow, 1997). In the promotional spot that highlighted a man who flunked French, Bravo attempted to connect a mainstream audience – who perceived Bravo’s program content as inaccessible – to the arts through humor and experience in a foreign culture. Whereas, the promotional spot foregrounding the young boy who called his sister a neo-fatalist sought to connect elite viewers – who viewed Bravo’s programming content as a form of education and enrichment – to the arts through intellectual humor grounded in lofty philosophical banter (“Life Imitates Art in New Campaign,” 1996).

The tension between Bravo’s highbrow roots and its new mainstream orientation can also be seen in the network’s advertising ventures. On the one hand, Bravo was an advertising venue used by specialty and boutique film production companies (Friedman, 1999). It was a low-cost choice for movie marketers interested in Bravo’s upscale demographic. Specialty film marketers working with limited budgets turned to Bravo for an affordable national cable buy. By the end of the 1990s, Bravo generated upwards of 15% of its advertising revenue from movie advertisements. The cable network attempted to move beyond traditional advertising by producing behind-the-scenes movie shorts that delved into how the movies advertised on Bravo were made (Friedman, 1999). On the other hand, Bravo and AMC had an innovative arrangement with Victoria’s



Secret. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the mainstream and commercially successful lingerie company sponsored a synergistic fashion package that spanned Bravo and AMC (Ross & Cardona, 1999). Both of these examples have something important in common: they take into account the move toward branded entertainment (Friedman, 1999).

In the realm of reruns, Bravo used *Twin Peaks* to launch its *TV Too Good For TV* showcase. Bravo did not have an array of syndicated programs that it aired in the 1990s.<sup>80</sup> Still, this formative example illustrates how Bravo “sculpted program flow” and telegraphed its brand identity (Turow, 1997). Moreover, the *TV Too Good For TV* showcase embodies the contradictions that characterized Bravo’s historical trajectory in the 1990s. Bravo positioned itself as superior to broadcast networks and defined its brand identity as antithetical to commercial growth, even as it relied on broadcast programming and pushed toward the mainstream commercial growth it purportedly rejected.

Similar contradictions can also be seen in the final component used to craft Bravo’s brand identity in the 1990s, signature programming. Turow (1997) defines signature programming as “a series created expressly for a particular programming network as an explicit on-air statement to audiences and advertisers about the personality of the network” (p. 114). *Inside the Actors Studio* makes the most explicit statement regarding Bravo’s effort to navigate both the highbrow and the mainstream in its brand identity. Guest selection, a nostalgic vision of

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<sup>80</sup> *Brooklyn Bridge* serves as another example of Bravo’s reliance on “recycled” series programming in the 1990s. Bravo purchased the full 35 episodes of the “autobiographical family series” *Brooklyn Bridge* after CBS canceled the show in 1993 (Beck & Smith, 1993). The “thoughtful CBS series” aired “to low ratings” between 1992-1993 (Freeman, 1994, p. E9).

celebrities and their respective arts, and Lipton's performance as host situated *Inside the Actors Studio* as a highbrow arts venue. Of course, popular culture readily mocked Lipton's faux authenticity and his bifurcation of art and commerce. Nonetheless, in the 2000s we still find an effort to preserve a division between commerce and art, even as the show becomes more commodified via technological interactivity. Interestingly, the main themes that permeated *Inside the Actors Studio* since its inception – hand-held cameras/editing, attention to celebrity lifestyle, and authenticity – are essential elements in Bravo's signature reality television. In that vein, when we situate *Inside the Actors Studio* within its historical context, we find that the show is a harbinger that offers insight into the rise of reality programming at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

### **Conclusion**

Bravo's historical trajectory in the 1990s highlights this cable network's conflicted brand identity. Bravo presented itself as a venue for elite and mainstream audiences with highbrow and popular programming. It simultaneously disavowed and increased its reliance on advertising. The biggest issue Bravo faced in its move to the mainstream was its subscriber base. In February 1998, when Bravo adopted a full advertising format industry discourse highlighted the cable network had exceeded 30 million subscribers, a threshold that purportedly needed to be breached to move beyond a sponsorship model (Media Wire, 1998).

In a decade characterized by technological convergence, Bravo solidified its status as cable network grounded in a full commercial format. From the launch of

eight interconnected websites<sup>81</sup> and interactive programming,<sup>82</sup> to online delivery of broadband content<sup>83</sup> and a partnership with Salon.com,<sup>84</sup> Bravo's content was being supplemented, augmented, and repurposed across various technological platforms via Rainbow Programming's multiple ventures. Simultaneously, industry convergence between Cablevision and NBC meant that the majority of NBC's cable ventures were part of Rainbow Programming and/or part of a joint venture with Cablevision (Mandese, 1993).<sup>85</sup>

Given that NBC's acquisition of Bravo in 2002 plays a formative role in the cable network's commercial trajectory, it is valuable to briefly situate Bravo's

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<sup>81</sup> In 1996 Rainbow Programming launched interconnected Internet websites for the eight cable networks it owned and operated. The "launch of eight web sites linked through an internal navigation system" was situated as an "unprecedented" occurrence that "allowed users to move effortlessly from site to site" (Rainbow Programming Heats," 1996, para. 1). President Josh Sapan emphasized that Rainbow is "extending the concept of niche programming onto the evolving Web platform" (para. 5), while senior VP Lauri Giddens added that "each site is specifically designed to bring viewers deeper into the worlds with which they most closely identify, providing a familiar environment as well as useful and necessary tools and resources" ("Rainbow Programming Heats," 1996, para. 6).

<sup>82</sup> In fall 1997 Bravo and IFC began offering interactive programming through the Interactive Channel. ChannelLink – an application for the Interactive Channel – allowed Bravo and IFC "to expand their programming to consumers and add new revenue opportunities without taking up additional system capacity" ("Bravo and Independent," 1997, para. 3). The Channel Link application used by The Interactive Channel created a "separate interactive domain" for IFC and Bravo that enabled the two networks to develop "customized programming guides, polling, surveys, program and network branded merchandise, and expanded content including background information on shows and stars" ("Bravo and Independent," 1997, para. 3).

<sup>83</sup> In 1999, Rainbow Programming made a distribution deal with Road Runner for the delivery of online broadband content for six (e.g. Bravo, IFC and AMC) (Bloomberg News, 1999, p. B10).

<sup>84</sup> In 1999, Rainbow Programming acquired a "10 percent stake in the Internet magazine Salon.com in exchange for 10 years of advertising valued at \$12 million" (Bloomberg News, 1999, p. B10). The Salon/Rainbow deal was situated as representative of "alliances among entertainment and Internet companies" that sought to "add content and sell advertising across different media" (Bloomberg News, 1999, p. B10). Rainbow Programming's 10% acquisition of Salon.com enabled the company to "swap TV programming, online content and promotion with the smart, entertainment oriented web publisher" (Breznick, 1999, p. 163). In particular, Salon.com would be developing a "weekly national show based on its web content for" Bravo (Breznick, 1999, p. 163).

<sup>85</sup> NBC had stake in: CNBC; various cable news channels; Prime Sport Channel America; multiple regional sports channels; Bravo; Court TV; AMC; and A&E (Mandese, 1993).

future parent company (NBC) and its current parent company (Cablevision) at the turn of the century. By the late 1990s NBC's substantial financial stake in Rainbow Programming was situated as representative of the growing confidence broadcast networks had in the cable industry (Burgi, 1997). Still, NBC had a specific objective that was unmet: NBC wanted full ownership of an entertainment-oriented cable channel (Carter, 1996). In hindsight, Cablevision's announcement of a new tracking stock, which allowed investors to trace the performance of the entertainment and program assets that constitute Rainbow Media Holdings, brought Bravo one more step closer to NBC ownership. In fact, the tracking stock was designed to allow investors to follow the individual economic performance of specific Rainbow assets (Cornell, Minichiello, Hare, & Landa, 2001). Bravo, AMC, and IFC were three of the specific assets being tracked.<sup>86</sup> NBC was looking for a cable network to purchase in order to expand its entertainment portfolio, and Cablevision was interested in how specific properties within its Rainbow subsidiary were performing. The stage was set for NBC's acquisition of Bravo.

This chapter began by contrasting the difference between cable and broadcast networks at the beginning and the end of the decade. Industry claims surrounding the divergences between these two mediums seems hyperbolic, as cable and broadcast television were not two categorically different businesses at the beginning of the 1990s (Schmuckler, 1997). In contrast, the attention to the

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<sup>86</sup> While the tracking stock was announced in 1999, it was not until February 2001 that Cablevision shareholders "approved the distribution" (Cornell, et al., 2001). At that point in time Bravo reported an operating cash flow of 9.8 million, a 97.1% increase from third to fourth quarter. Bravo's growth was a result of increases in subscribers (15%), advertising revenue (66%) and prime-time ratings (Cornell, et al., 2001).

increasing convergence as the 1990s progressed was not overstated. From the neoliberal discursive and material practices that constitute how content, ratings, and audiences are produced and managed, to the synergistic relations within and amongst a vast array of information/entertainment industries and platforms grounded in the purported viability of the free market, by the end of the decade cable and broadcast networks were becoming indistinguishable in the digital media landscape. The trend toward cable/broadcast convergence continues in the twenty-first century. In fact, Bravo's rise as a multi-platform venue for affluent lifestyle entertainment takes place under NBC ownership. Moreover, the distribution and marketing practices that propel Bravo to popular culture stardom serve as salient trends in the 2003 merger that leads to the formation of NBC Universal.

## CHAPTER 5

### FROM Highbrow Arts to Affluent Lifestyle Entertainment

Bravo ended the 1990s, and began the new century, as a cultural arts cable network in a state of transition. In contrast, by the end of the 2000s Bravo relied on the ostentatious branded entertainment found in its signature reality programming to sell lifestyle interests and consumer practices to female viewers. The Spring 2010 edition of *Bravo Affluencer* – a business-to-business marketing tool Bravo has published annually since 2008 – used specific achievements to highlight Bravo’s “Passion for Excellence” (Bravo Affluencer, 2010/2011). These achievements, which span Bravo’s program content, audience, and advertising climate, vividly illustrate Bravo’s commercial metamorphosis in the decade under analysis. First, Bravo’s signature reality programming coincided with four years of growth, both online and on-air. Second, Bravo’s audience, as evidenced by the claims in this promotional tool, primarily consisted of women, and amongst women 18-49 Bravo was a top-ten cable network. Finally, Bravo’s advertising climate offered brand-lifting results. Most notably, Bravo was situated as the number one “entertainment network for brand opinion improvement in cable” (Bravo Affluencer, 2010/2011, p. 1)

All of the achievements listed above capitalized on some type of network/industry data to tout the value of Bravo’s brand identity, program content, and audience. While the veracity of the claims presented above can surely be put into question, the significance industry professionals afford to this type of brand management is undisputable. When Nielsen IAG data situates Bravo as the

highest ranked network for improvement in brand opinion on cable, it matters to industry professionals. Similarly, when the Nielsen Company notes that Bravo was responsible for nine of the top twenty brand lifting product integrations in 2009, it matters to industry professionals (Bravo Affluencer, 2010/2011).

This chapter examines the decade in which Bravo transformed from a highbrow cultural arts network that sold the cultural capital of bourgeois viewers into an affluent lifestyle entertainment network with an unparalleled ability to package, market, and sell a nouveau riche gendered audience. I am interested in the vast array of paratexts – from business-to-business advertising and consumer advertising, to coverage in the mainstream press and ratings – that shaped the Bravo brand for industry professionals and the general public in the 2000s. Analysis of these paratexts give visibility to the role that midlevel practices played in Bravo’s rise as a cable network characterized by brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence. My incorporation of feminist studies allows me to delve into the dynamics amongst gender, commodification, and branding that ground the nouveau riche consumer citizenship found in Bravo’s affluent lifestyle entertainment. My findings in the 2000s illustrate the role synergistic relations amongst various entertainment properties and platforms have played, and continue to play, in a postnetwork media landscape driven by digital convergence.

The first half of the chapter examines the shifts in program content, ownership, audience, and advertising between 2000 and 2004 that moved Bravo beyond highbrow arts programming. However, change takes time, and Bravo’s rise

as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network required more than the massive popular culture success of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Given that Bravo lacked a coherent brand identity amongst industry professionals following its move to reality television, the second half of the chapter attends to how Bravo crafted its brand identity post *Queer Eye* (2005 – 2010). Here, the central role gendered affluence, multi-platform convergence, and branded entertainment played in Bravo's rebranding is a primary focus. I also examine the acquisition of female-oriented entertainment properties and the formation of a new female marketing initiative at NBC Universal in the late 2000s to illustrate how Bravo's new attention to a gendered audience reverberated in the industry practices of its parent company.

### **Cable Networks, Branding, and Syndicated Programming**

After twenty years as a cultural arts cable network, Bravo's brand identity was in a state of flux by the early 2000s. Newspaper and trade journal coverage of Bravo's acquisition of syndicated programming between 2000 and 2002 captured this moment particularly well. In the last chapter we saw that Bravo used syndicated programming with mainstream appeal to increase viewership (e.g. *Twin Peaks*). This continues in the 2000s, with one important difference: Bravo engaged in pricey syndication deals that received substantial coverage across newspapers and trade journals between 2000 and 2002. In contrast, coverage of Bravo's acquisition of *Twin Peaks* in the 1990s received minimal press coverage.

Syndicated programming plays a formative role in shaping a cable network's brand identity (Turow, 1997). Here, I use syndicated programming and



the acquisition of *The West Wing* as lenses to uncover how industry discourse situated Bravo at this transitory moment. In the two years that preceded Bravo's sale to NBC, as this cable network navigated its new reliance upon a full advertising model, syndicated programming served as a valuable tool that provided a new level of popular culture visibility for Bravo.

Bravo's new reliance on a costly syndicated program like *The West Wing* cannot be separated from this cable network's transition to a full advertising format at the end of the twentieth century. Discussion of Bravo's move from commercial sponsorship to traditional advertising in a 2000 *Cable World* article offers useful insights into the dynamics amongst subscribers, advertisers, and demand. In an interview with Bravo advertising sales vice president Hanna Gryncwajg, an unnamed *Cable World* journalist asked if it was true that Bravo "was the first cable network since Nickelodeon to wait until its subscribership was high before becoming advertising supported" ("Fast Talk," 2000, p. 18).<sup>87</sup> The way the question is asked suggests at least two things. First, Bravo's willingness to wait until it had thirty-five million subscribers evidenced restraint ("Fast Talk," 2000, p. 18). Second, Bravo always intended to move to a full advertising format: it just needed enough subscribers. Here we get insight into how the taken-for-granted realities of commercial broadcasting guided the trajectory of basic cable (Streeter, 1996).

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<sup>87</sup> As noted in the last chapter, 30 million subscribers served as the industry threshold that needed to be reached for a basic cable network to move to a full advertising format ("Media Wire," 1998).\

At this point in time, Bravo's desirable demographic and high level of subscribers purportedly made the cable network prime real estate for advertisers. Despite becoming more beholden to advertising clients, Bravo's advertising sales vice president Hanna Grynchwajg sought "to achieve a really good balance between growing ratings and not losing the integrity of what the network is – a niche network dedicated to art and film" (Hardesty, 2000, p. 18). Grynchwajg's comment suggests that the full advertising format would not lead to a disavowal of film and arts programming. Nonetheless, traditional advertising was situated as integral to Bravo's growth, and industry discourse emphasized how this move increased Bravo's distribution<sup>88</sup> and provided Bravo with additional programming revenue (Lee, 2001).<sup>89</sup>

Here it is important to note the differences between an advertiser-based economic model and subscriber-based economic model. An advertising-supported network sells viewers to potential clients based on television ratings that are calculated by Nielsen Media Research. Ratings measure the number of viewers within a specific audience demographic. To determine the estimated cost of airing a commercial during a program, the rating for that program is multiplied by the cost per thousand (CPM). CPM is an industry-wide standard that allocates a specific dollar value to an audience based on age and gender. Given these parameters, the easiest way to increase revenue is by attaining more viewers for a

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<sup>88</sup> For example, *Cable World* journalist L. Hardesty (2000) noted Bravo moved from 35 million to 44 million subscribers in its first year with a full commercial advertising format.

<sup>89</sup> For example, *Cable World* journalist Will Lee (2001) noted that the money that flooded in from advertising revenue supported a 126% increase in Bravo's programming budget from \$30.2 million in 1998 to \$ 68.3 million in 2001.

given program. Of course, another option would be to shift to an audience with a higher CPM. In contrast, a subscriber-supported network sells a program service to potential viewers. Ensuring the overall value of the subscription service is the primary way to increase revenue, and the number or type of viewers for a specific program is of much less concern (Lotz, 2007b).

In the 2000s, Bravo could no longer focus on selling a quality service to viewers. Bravo was now an advertising-supported cable network, and ratings are what would allow Bravo to increase its revenue. Granted, developments tied to cable narrowcasting had led to audience erosion, and broadcast networks now reached a drastically small portion of the nationwide audience.<sup>90</sup>In this new climate, audience size still mattered for advertising-supported networks. Narrowcasting had not supplanted the value afforded to casting a wide net. Instead, the parameters for what constituted a large audience shifted. Reaching twenty million households was no longer required to attain a top-thirty rating: now this status could be achieved by reaching nine million households (Lotz, 2006). Still, Bravo did not have viewers in the millions, and this was necessary to compete.

Ultimately, Bravo's shift to a full advertising format conflicted with the cable network's reliance on cultural arts programming. Mainstream advertisers were attracted to Bravo's audience and programming, and there was potential for more growth, assuming the network could shed its highbrow past (Cleland, 2000).

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<sup>90</sup> For example, at the conclusion of the 1979/1980 season three broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and, NBC) reached 90% of television viewers (Caldwell, 1995), in contrast by the end of 1999/2000 season six broadcast network (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, The WB, and UPN) only reached 58% of television viewers (Lotz, 2006).

Since the late 1990s, Bravo had launched at least two promotional campaigns aimed to shed its association with class elitism.<sup>91</sup> Like the aforementioned campaigns, Bravo's turn to costly syndicated programming in the early 2000s was an effort to increase the cable network's mainstream appeal. Like its basic cable peers, Bravo attempted to navigate the tension between providing original programming that played to a specialized audience and syndicated broadcast programming that attracted a larger and more mainstream audience. On the one hand, original content offered the ability for a cable network to stand out amongst its peers. Still, standing out could be risky, given that very few signature series are able to become the next *Biography* on A&E or *South Park* on Comedy Central (Pinsker, 2001). On the other hand, syndicated programming was used to shape brand identity and support the promotion of signature shows (Turow, 1997). Of course, popular syndicated programming was a costly endeavor for a mid-sized cable network like Bravo.

Bravo's acquisition of *The West Wing* was possible due to the new levels of cash flow from distribution deals<sup>92</sup> and advertising revenue. The costly and commercially viable syndicated program – Bravo paid \$1.2 million an episode for *The West Wing* – was seen as a way for Bravo to increase ratings, generate advertising revenue, increase its subscriber base, and acquire new viewers for its

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<sup>91</sup> In 1996 Bravo launched the “Art that goes with your couch campaign” discussed in chapter 4, then in 1999 Bravo marketed itself to an upscale mainstream demographic via a \$10 million dollar cable and print advertising campaign with the tag line “Not your everyday...everyday on Bravo” (Cleland, 2000, p. 14). Caroline Bock, Bravo's senior marketing vice president noted that the smart humor in the advertising campaign was an effort to convey “We're not taking art so seriously, so elitist” (Cleland, 2000, p. 14).

<sup>92</sup> San Francisco Interconnect was one of the new cable providers adding Bravo to its line-up. Bravo's wealthy audience and arts niche were offered as reasons why Bravo was added (Hardesty, 2000).

original programming (Cleland, 2000; Moss, 2001). In fact, industry discourse noted how national advertisers were unconcerned with the use of recycled network programming. For example, when Bravo acquired first run syndication rights for *The West Wing* in 2001, the cable network was approached by two national advertisers that requested exclusive sponsorships for a series that would not start airing on Bravo until fall 2003 (Moss, 2001).

Bravo general manager Ed Carroll situated *The West Wing* as a marquee show that would allow the cable network to stand out amongst other competitors (Moss, 2001). *The West Wing's* intellectual cachet came along with an upscale audience and popular culture appeal that had the potential to jumpstart Bravo's prime-time programming. As was common at this point in time, Bravo capitalized on its costly acquisition by using the ubiquity and mainstream popularity of *The West Wing* to heavily promote original programming to its sixty million subscribers. The goal was to give Bravo's signature programming an aura of success via association with *The West Wing* (Moss, 2001).

As an entertaining political drama, *The West Wing* aligned with Bravo's emphasis on bourgeois consumer citizenship. Like *The Awful Truth* – the Michael Moore documentary series Bravo aired in the 1990s – *The West Wing* offered bourgeois consumer citizens access to civically charged content that tapped into highbrow interests via its attention to politics. *The West Wing* presented politics in an engaging, accessible, and pleasurable way that resonated with viewers (Jones, 2005). Still, the show's mainstream viability and hefty price tag were of the utmost importance to Bravo's commercial success as an advertising supported cable

network. Overall, industry discourse surrounding Bravo's acquisition of first run syndication of *The West Wing* attended to the show's commercial appeal and what this unexpected turn of events meant for Bravo.

Bravo's acquisition of *The West Wing* was most commonly met with perplexed adulation, as Bravo – a second tier cable network – bested first tier cable networks to acquire a commercially viable show like *The West Wing*. For example, *Broadcasting and Cable* journalists John Higgins and Susanne Ault (2001) seemed surprised that Bravo beat out A&E, TNT, USA, and Court TV for first run syndication of *The West Wing*. While the acquisition was unexpected, the tenor of pleasant surprise was followed by adulation. Most journalists lauded the acquisition of the NBC hit drama and situated it as an indicator that Bravo was now willing to pay for ratings (Higgins & Ault, 2001). *Cable World* suggested that Bravo had moved from a second tier cable network driven by the imperative to increase its subscriber base, to an A-list party crasher willing to pump millions into syndicated programming ("West Wing Deal," 2001). Similarly, *Variety* journalist John Dempsey (2001) positioned the deal as a "watershed moment in the transformation of the marketplace," because completely out of nowhere Bravo had bested first tier cable networks like Lifetime, USA, and TNT through its acquisition of *West Wing* reruns (p. 28).

*The West Wing* marked a formative point in Bravo's move from a highbrow cultural arts network to an advertising-driven basic cable network interested in mainstream appeal. The coverage discussed above included pleasant surprise, followed by praise. Most journalists embraced this approach. Despite this, some

journalists contextualized the unexpected nature of Bravo's costly acquisition. Most notably, *Cable World* journalist Will Lee (2001) noted how *The West Wing* represented a shift from a highbrow to a nouveau riche<sup>93</sup> audience, which would most likely lead to a drop in the cable network's cachet and acculturated edge. In demographic terms, this meant a drop in adult viewers between the ages of 25 and 54 who earn more than \$100,000 a year. In contrast, Bravo was expected to have a more nouveau riche or mainstream appeal, meaning it would reach more adults 25-54 who earn \$75,000 (Lee, 2001). While earning over \$100,000 does translate into highbrow viewers, and earning \$75,000 or less does not constitute being a nouveau riche viewer, class and salary are two crude indicators used by the television industry to sell the audience commodity to advertisers.

At this point in time, advertising-based cable networks needed to balance between a niche segment drawn to specialized original content and the wider demographic accessible on broadcast television. The goal was to meet the needs of prospective clients that wanted to get a large audience for a low cost per thousand (Turow, 1997). Since ratings are the standard industry tool for measuring and monitoring the audience commodity, Bravo relied on pricey syndicated programming to generate ratings and thereby increase advertising revenue. Another benefit of syndicated content was pulling in new viewers who would hopefully sample original programming like *Bravo Profiles* and *Inside the Actors*

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<sup>93</sup> Overall, the use of the term nouveau riche was infrequent in coverage of the Bravo cable network. Even in the late mid-to-late 2000s, when Bravo shifts to what I refer to as "affluent lifestyle entertainment," the term is not used frequently. Instead, the term is evoked through the use of other terms (e.g. affluence, lifestyle, and conspicuous consumption).

*Studio* (Cleland, 2000; Lee, 2001). All of these pertinent shifts were of immense value when Cablevision sold Bravo to GE/NBC at the end of 2002.

### **Bravo, NBC, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy***

When GE acquired Bravo in 2002 the cable network had fifty-four million subscribers (Carter, 2007). Industry discourse at this point in time suggests that when distribution exceeds fifty million, broadening program appeal allowed a cable network to secure advertisers interested in moving beyond a specialized audience (Martin, 2004a). In particular, pulling in the young and desirable demographic sought by advertisers was of the utmost importance, even if that meant deviating from a well-defined audience niche. Like other media conglomerates, NBC acquired cable properties, in part, to address concerns surrounding the erosion of broadcast network viewers. From Telemundo and Bravo, to the potential merger with Vivendi Universal Entertainment, NBC was looking for ways to reach new audiences in the early 2000s. In fact, *The Wall Street Journal* situated cable channels and television production as the main interest for NBC's parent company GE (Orwall, Nelson, & Flint, 2003). This was especially true since CNBC and MSNBC were struggling with ratings and new cable channels provided a competitive advantage by allowing GE to "spread out the costs of its news operations" (Orwall, Nelson, & Flint, 2003, p. 1)

As a niche cable network with fifty-four million subscribers, Bravo was a new revenue stream with significant potential for growth. Still, executives at NBC believed changes needed to be made. Most notably, while NBC Chairman Bob Wright found Bravo's highbrow status appealing, the executive characterized



Bravo as a “fixer-upper in need of help” (Romano, 2002, p. 1). Since the goal was to achieve mainstream viability and commercial growth, Wright believed Bravo needed to become younger and flashier. Accordingly, NBC sought to move Bravo beyond the fine-tuned audience niche and highbrow arts programming model that still characterized the cable network’s brand identity.

In the subsections that follow I examine industry discourse surrounding Bravo, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and NBC during a twenty month time frame that began when Bravo was acquired at the end of 2002 and culminated when NBC merged with Vivendi Universal in spring 2004. During this short period of time, Bravo was catapulted to popular culture stardom through the massive commercial success of *Queer Eye*. NBC played a formative role in *Queer Eye*’s popular appeal and commercial success. Moreover, the synergistic relations between the NBC broadcast network and Bravo left an indelible mark that can be seen in the industry discourse leading up to and following the NBC/Vivendi Universal merger. The sections that follow rely on mid-level industry analysis of Bravo and NBC to give visibility to how the marketing and distribution of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* linked these two networks and influenced the formation of NBC Universal.

### ***Queer Eye* and Bravo’s Commercial Growth**

Jeff Gaspin played an important role in Bravo’s commercial growth and mainstream appeal from winter 2003 until he was promoted, following the formation of NBC Universal in spring 2004. Gaspin’s tenure as Bravo president was short. Still, the transformation that took place at Bravo under his leadership warrants attention. When Gaspin was appointed president, he was aware that

Bravo needed a flashy signature program that could begin to build a new brand identity (Larson, 2003a). His main goal was to make the cable network stand out in the cable world, and he aimed to do this by transforming Bravo from a cultural arts network into a hip, popular, and mainstream entertainment programmer (Ellin, 2004). In fact, Gaspin wanted all of Bravo's programming to reflect and influence popular culture (Brady, 2003), and *Queer Eye's* presence across newspaper and trade journal coverage indicates that the reality show reflected important aspects of, and left an indelible mark on, popular culture. Gaspin's attention to Bravo's network personality speaks to how "branding has shifted from its status as an off-screen concern of marketing personnel and ad agency research to a self-conscious form of promotional reflexivity that has also altered the very look and sound of contemporary television" (Caldwell, 2008, p. 246)

Bravo's commercial acceleration started in summer of 2003 when the network inaugurated a makeover reality series that relied on five lifestyle savvy, gay male hosts to revamp the personal style, cultural etiquette, and taste palate of heterosexual male contestants. Gaspin did not need to look far for *Queer Eye* – the first original program that aired under his tenure as Bravo president – since the development of the series preceded NBC's purchase of Bravo. In May 2002, prior to NBC's acquisition of Bravo, the casting and development of *Queer Eye* was well underway. The process of casting started with a call to identify trendy and urbane gay males with specialized training in food/wine, culture, grooming, fashion, and interior design. The casting call sought five hosts that could transform a common and unrefined heterosexual male into a Renaissance man (Rutenberg, 2002).

Reality television – a genre capturing the collective imagination – was purportedly appealing to an array of viewers in the early 2000s (Martin, 2004a). In particular, reality programs with a makeover premise were popular, and *Queer Eye's* reliance on a group of gay male hosts was seen as a unique twist on the makeover premise (Whitney, 2003).

It did not take long for *Queer Eye* to become a hit at Bravo. The show premiered in July 2003, and by August the hosts – affectionately referred as the “Fab Five” – landed the cover for *Entertainment Weekly* (Albiniak, Romano, McConnel, & Eggerton, 2003). Various trade journals and newspapers noted the phenomenal response to *Queer Eye*. Broadly speaking, coverage highlighted the show’s popular culture caché and rating records, as well as the role the series and its hosts played in Bravo’s newfound success. For example, *Broadcasting and Cable* noted that *Queer Eye* increased Bravo’s “18-49 viewership in its main time slot by 790%” (Higgins & Albiniak, 2003, p. 1), and highlighted how the makeover reality series enabled Bravo to move from the number thirty-eight cable network to the number two cable network in its Tuesday 10PM timeslot (Albiniak, 2003). Similarly, *Mediaweek* attended to high cable ratings and increased viewership (Larson, 2003b), as well as the show’s ability to generate “more buzz than any other original cable or broadcast series” (Berman, 2003, n.p.). Whereas *New York Times* journalist Bill Carter positioned *Queer Eye* as an “unchallenged media sensation, which has piled up magazine covers” and “shattered ratings for its home network, Bravo, virtually every week it has been on” (2003, p. 1). Both *Adweek* and *Cable World* also commented on the phenomenal success of the unscripted reality

series. *Adweek* journalist Megan Larson (2003c) noted the significant ratings gains and linked Bravo's 136% increase in the 18-34 male demographic to *Queer Eye*. While Shirley Brandy, a journalist for *Cable World*, highlighted how the "Fab Five grabbed the spotlight for Bravo" (Brady, 2003, p. 18). Specifically, building momentum throughout the final months of summer, *Queer Eye* bested all viewing records in Bravo's twenty plus years on the air by exceeding three million viewers at the end of August (Brady, 2003).

*Queer Eye* was a massive commercial success. Still, the show did lead to industry confusion surrounding Bravo's brand identity. For example, a brand strategist interviewed in *The New York Times* noted the inconsistencies in Bravo's programming, and questioned whether Bravo was a cultural arts channel or a reality television network (Ellin, 2004). At this point in time, Bravo had not shed its brand identity as a highbrow arts programmer. In the minds of many journalists, Bravo was still a cultural arts network. In contrast, *Queer Eye* was seen as a mainstream reality show that did not align with highbrow arts programming. *Queer Eye* increased Bravo's mainstream appeal, led the cable network to pull in queer viewers – a new niche audience for Bravo – and put Bravo's brand identity into a state of flux due to its lack of resemblance to Bravo's most well-know original program, *Inside The Actors Studio*.

As Gaspin intended, *Queer Eye* clearly tapped into something important in popular culture and thereby changed Bravo's status as a cable network. Still, what potential role did NBC's ownership of the cable network play in this outcome? Or, how might things have looked if the show aired under Cablevision ownership?

*Broadcasting & Cable* journalists (2003) reflected on the new value NBC brought Bravo, and the role the parent company may be playing in the success of *Queer Eye*.

As noted in *Broadcasting & Cable*:

While NBC execs toast the success of Bravo's makeover show, the folks over at the nets former parent, Cablevision's Rainbow Media Holding, may be shaking their heads a bit. *Queer Eye* was in the works when NBC acquired Bravo last fall. But would the show have been as big on the old Bravo, where the highest-rated program was the venerable *Inside the Actors Studio*?" (Albiniak, Romano, McConnel, & Eggerton, 2003, p. 6)

The aforementioned quote references the role that ratings and synergy would play in *Queer Eye's* potential success. Mediocre ratings and the venerable status of *Inside the Actors Studio*, combined with the contrast between Cablevision and NBC, suggest there is a right answer to the rhetorical question posed by the journalists. On one hand there is respected and tasteful highbrow arts programming aired on Bravo under Cablevision ownership; on the other hand, there is programming with popular appeal and high ratings aired on Bravo under NBC ownership.

*Queer Eye* was not directly positioned as a program that lacked taste and/or respect. Still, a direct contrast was being made between Cablevision's Rainbow Media Holding – a media entity that promoted/aired programs with venerable status and modest ratings – and NBC, a media entity that promoted/aired programs with commercial appeal and high ratings. In particular, Albiniak, Romano, McConnell, and Eggerton (2003) noted that NBC provided the makeover reality series with production power and promotional muscle, which most likely would not have been possible under Cablevision ownership.

## Cable Television, Ratings, and Synergy

Bravo was not the only basic cable network focused on mainstream appeal in the early 2000s AMC and A&E were also undergoing a similar shift (Martin, 2004a). The common denominator was the role commercial interests played for three cable networks owned by different media conglomerates. Each of these basic cable networks started without advertising and/or were partially supported by advertising. Despite this, by the 2000s advertising played a substantial role in revenue for Bravo, AMC, and A&E. As advertising revenue became the primary focus, a shift occurred; Bravo, AMC, and A&E needed to pull in the viewers that were of the most interest to their clients. Ratings, an industry-sanctioned tool used to assess the value of the audience commodity, became of the utmost importance. The paramount element that drives ratings is the demand for consumers, and together “the market for consumers and the market for ratings profoundly influence the market for programs” (Meehan, 2005, p. 118).

Since consumers and ratings are the sole route to advertising revenue, *Queer Eye's* commercial success was of the utmost importance to Bravo's growth. Shifts in advertising sales, viewing, and distribution were directly linked to the reality series. *Queer Eye* was purportedly responsible for a four percent growth in advertising sales and the acquisition of seventy-four new advertisers (e.g. Toy “R” Us, AT&T, Verizon, Honda Motorcycles, Anheuser Bush, and Pepsi). Moreover, the vast majority of viewers purportedly watched Bravo for the Fab Five, “not because they expect[ed] highbrow arts and culture” (Ellin, 2004, p. 1). By July 2004, only a year after the inaugural airing of *Queer Eye*, Bravo was positioned as a contender

due to the cable network's valuable shifts in distribution and viewers. From 2003 to 2004 Bravo's subscriber base increased from seventy million to seventy-six million homes, while the median age of the cable network's primetime viewer's dropped from 49.8 to 45.7, and median viewer income rose from \$61,449 to nearly \$66,000 (Ellin, 2004).

Bravo president Jeff Gaspin was responsible for marketing *Queer Eye*, and he used synergistic cross promotion to catapult *Queer Eye* into the popular culture spotlight. Most notably, *Queer Eye* marked the first implementation of a new distribution practice at NBC: reverse repurposing. For most of television's history, the standard industry distribution practice was for a national broadcast network to pay a production company for rights that allowed them to exclusively air a series for a specific period of time. Exclusive rights were typically granted for approximately five years, and the programming aired nationally during prime time. After this time period the series could be syndicated, which meant it could be sold to local broadcast and/or cable networks (Lotz, 2007a). Of course, distribution practices are continually being redefined in the television industry, and in the late 1990s repurposing developed as a way for content providers to make additional revenue for a series by crafting deals that allowed for multiple airing during the original run of a series (Lotz, 2007a).<sup>94</sup> A shift occurred in distribution again in the early 2000s. By this time, repurposing was an industry

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<sup>94</sup> For example, Amanda Lotz (2007a) offers a financing deal between the NBC broadcast network and the cable channel USA for *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)* as an early example of how repurposing changed in the late 1990s. In this instance the USA cable network was given the right to air episodes of *SVU* two weeks after being aired on NBC (Lotz, 2007a). *SVU* was produced by Studios USA a production company, which along with the USA cable network was owned by Vivendi Universal Entertainment. The deal enabled the production company (Studios USA) to make money off the concurrent airing of *SVU* on a broadcast network (NBC) and a cable network (USA).

standard that denoted the practice of cable channels' airing content that first aired on a broadcast network. In contrast, the new development, reverse repurposing, was a term used to indicate the practice of a broadcast network airing content that first aired on a cable network.

Entertainment president Jeff Zucker offered his thoughts on the reverse repurposing of *Queer Eye* on the NBC broadcast network by noting that when NBC took over Bravo, "many people were worried" the cable network "would become NBC 2" (Ellin 2004, p. 1). Yet, Zucker added, "NBC has become Bravo 2" (Ellin, 2004, p. 1). Here, Zucker trivializes the synergistic relations occurring at NBC by implicitly suggesting at least two things: (1) people were needlessly worried about NBC's acquisition of Bravo since the cable network did not become NBC 2 and (2) the recirculation of Bravo content on the NBC broadcast network is not a cause for concern. In reality, even if recirculation of content never flows from the NBC broadcast network to Bravo, there are a multitude of other reasons to be concerned about broadcast/cable convergence. First, this type of convergence furthers the commercial interests and profit motives of the handful of media conglomerates that control media production, distribution, and consumption. Second, broadcast/cable convergence allows for well-integrated cross-promotional efforts that exploit market power and brand amplification (Hardy, 2013). In this instance, NBC's reverse repurposing with *Queer Eye* exemplifies how the media conglomerate relied on its market power to exploit synergistic relations amongst its entertainment properties. The distribution and marketing of *Queer Eye* on the NBC broadcast network amplified the *Queer Eye* brand. In fact, NBC's



reverse repurposing of *Queer Eye* illustrates the important role ratings – a constructed entity that serves the needs of networks and advertisers by measuring whether consumers tune in – play in the programming practices of transnational media conglomerates (Meehan, 2005).

Reverse repurposing was unprecedented in the early 2000s. The only prior instance was ABC's re-airing of the USA original program *Monk* (Cater, 2003). From a ratings perspective, reverse repurposing can be seen as a synergistic tool that allowed ABC and NBC to bask in the aura of buzz worthy cable programming. For example, ABC's re-airing of *Monk* was situated as an effort to address the rating duress occurring during the ABC broadcast network's 2002 television season (Cater, 2003). Similarly, pumping up ratings at the NBC broadcast network was a consideration with the recirculation of *Queer Eye*. Most notably, the re-airing of Bravo's reality television hit purportedly allowed the broadcast network to capitalize on an "unchallenged media sensation" (Carter, 2003, p. 1). Reverse repurposing was more than a synergistic practice used to promote broadcast networks in need of a ratings bump. It was also a promotional tool that catapulted *Queer Eye* to pop stardom. Yet as we will see in the next section, cultural presumptions surrounding queer representation played a formative role in the type of gay reality show NBC was willing to put its promotional muscle behind.

### **Bravo, NBC, and Gay Themed Programming**

*Queer Eye's* inaugural episode aired on July 15. Only a few weeks later, NBC's entertainment president Jeff Zucker aired *Queer Eye* in *ER's* 10 PM time slot on Thursday night for the whole month of August. Zucker claimed that *Queer Eye's*

fast start led him to realize the role exposing the show on NBC could provide for both channels, although prior coverage in *Broadcasting & Cable* suggests reverse repurposing had been in the plan months before the show's first telecast. For example, in February 2003 *Broadcasting & Cable* journalist Allison Romano (2003) highlighted plans to possibly repeat episodes of *Queer Eye* on the NBC broadcast network. Romano (2003) emphasized the role promotional time on NBC could play luring viewers to Bravo. NBC's promotional blitz on behalf of *Queer Eye* can be seen in a Thursday night telecast of *Queer Eye* on the NBC broadcast network that coincided with the Fab Five's makeover of Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show* (De Moraes, 2003a). Similarly, MSNBC pundits Pat Buchanan and Bill Press also got makeovers when the Fab Five appeared on *Buchanan and Press* via satellite on August 11.<sup>95</sup>

Cross promotion was not just a strategy used to inaugurate *Queer Eye* in its premier season. Bravo's very rich corporate parent continued to engage in synergistic marketing when the second season of *Queer Eye* aired. In winter 2004 *Queer Eye* was reverse repurposed nine times on NBC. In one instance, three

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<sup>95</sup> Despite the host's extreme distaste for series the Fab Five appeared on *Buchanan and Press* via satellite on August 11. Four days prior to the airing of *Queer Eye*'s inaugural episode the two hosts expressed their distaste for the antics of the Fab Five. During the July 11 *Buchanan and Press* telecast liberal Bill Press "warned MSNBC viewers the new show would attempt to 'turn virtually any man into a handsome sharp-dressed homosexual,' moreover the host noted the makeover show would position "all straight men" as "pigs" (de Moraes, 2003a, p. 7). Press then pledged to never watch *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Press took the pledge after "New York Post TV critic Linda Stasi had told him that in the pilot episode the Fab Five 'say things...that are truly dirty'" (de Moraes, 2003a, p. 7). Buchanan positioned the show as "grungy" humor "that kids might laugh at if they're a freshmen in high school" (de Moraes, 2003a, p. 7). Buchanan and Press's homophobic rant ended with Press firmly acknowledging that his "reality never included having five gay guys" teaching him "how to dress" (de Moraes, 2003a, p. 7). Press argued that self-respecting homosexuals "would be turned off" by *Queer Eye* and suggested that the show targeted a "tiny segment of the gay community," which he positioned as "some real sludge" (de Moraes, 2003a, p. 7).

episodes of the reality series aired back-to-back on Super Bowl Sunday (Ellin, 2004). While executives were reticent to say exactly how much NBC spent, *New York Times* journalist Abby Ellin (2004) noted that Bravo's corporate parent spent millions cross promoting *Queer Eye* and the Fab Five.

The main theme of newspaper and trade journal coverage on NBC's use of reverse repurposing was how this cross-promotional strategy catapulted *Queer Eye* to popular culture stardom. Overall, articles commenting on NBC's cross promotion and/or reverse repurposing efforts with *Queer Eye* made little effort to seriously interrogate the political economic and cultural implications of the small number of vertically and horizontally integrated media conglomerates that rely on synergistic relations to dominate the media landscape. Furthermore, the successful cross promotion and reverse repurposing utilized to promote *Queer Eye* was commonly positioned as an innovative practice that enabled NBC to capitalize on the synergistic relations across its media properties. More specifically, the topic of reverse repurposing and *Queer Eye* came up in discussion of the potential merger between GE/NBC and Vivendi Universal Entertainment. As noted in *The Wall Street Journal*:

Bravo, an arts-and-entertainment channel NBC agreed to buy last year may be more indicative of how NBC hopes to manage new cable channels. NBC executives looked for one marquee show to establish the network and spent about one-quarter of Bravo's annual marketing budget on "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." The reality show chronicles five stylish gay men as they make over one straight man each episode. NBC milked the show with special segments and ads on everything from "The Tonight Show" to MSNBC's "Buchanan and Press." As a result, the show has received buzz and media attention this summer with magazine covers and newspaper articles. The most recent episode drew 3.1 million viewers, the most for a telecast in Bravo's 22 years. That kind of support will be important if NBC hopes

to improve the performance of Vivendi networks such as USA. (Orwall, Nelson, & Flint, 2003, p. 1)

As this excerpt illustrates, NBC executives sought out a marquee show to establish Bravo's new brand identity, and then spent a significant portion of Bravo's yearly promotional budget marketing *Queer Eye*. Interestingly, *Queer Eye* was not the only signature series Bravo aired in summer 2003. *Boy Meets Boy* – another gay themed reality show that had its inaugural airing on Bravo a few weeks after *Queer Eye* – offers insight into constraints on gay representation in the television industry and the value of NBC's synergistic cross promotion of *Queer Eye*.

*Boy Meets Boy* was a dating show that had fifteen men – some of them gay and some of them straight – competing for the gay male lead. The leading man was unaware that there were straight contestants (Stanley, 2003). The premier episode of *Boy Meets Boy* aired on July 30 leading into *Queer Eye*. Like the first three *Queer Eye* telecasts, the inaugural episode of *Boy Meets Boy* pulled in approximately 1.6 million viewers. Yet *Queer Eye* found a new level of ratings success when it “jumped to 2.8 million viewers” for its fourth telecast (De Moraes, 2003b, p. 7). The day prior to the ratings jump the NBC broadcast network “aired a half-hour prime time infomercial” for *Queer Eye* that pulled in “nearly 7 million viewers” (De Moraes, 2003b, p. 7). The comparable number of viewers for the premier episodes of *Boy Meets Boy* and *Queer Eye*, and the drastic increase in ratings following the airing of a full episode of *Queer Eye* on the NBC broadcast network, together suggest the role NBC's reverse repurposing played in the success of *Queer Eye*. Moreover, a question arises: why did NBC put promotional muscle behind the one series, as opposed to the other? Of course, there are multiple factors that may have

contributed to the decision to put promotional muscle behind *Queer Eye*, as opposed to *Boy Meets Boy*. Still, one important reason may have been the less threatening nature of *Queer Eye*. As a gay reality show that put heterosexual males in the closet, *Boy Meet Boy* directly questioned sexual identity, whereas *Queer Eye* relied on the Fab Five's version of emergency lifestyle repair (Stanley, 2003). Using five gay men to help hapless heterosexual male contestants to improve their lifestyle is arguably less threatening to cultural norms surrounding the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Alternatively, a gay dating show with homosexual and heterosexual contestants competing for a gay male lead has more potential to destabilize unquestioned assumptions surrounding sexual identity.

In fact, media scholar Katherine Sender's (2006) textual analysis of *Queer Eye* attends to the salient role consumption and personal responsibility play in the makeover show. Most notably, the Fab Five serve as expert trainers for inept heterosexual males seemingly unaware of how to consume. Even as the camp sensibilities of the show offered promise, five gay male hosts made heterosexual men more marriageable and employable on television within a cultural climate that lacked constitutional support for same sex marriage and federal employment protection for queer men and women (Sender, 2006). Ultimately, NBC's strategic use of reverse repurposing intentionally or unintentionally privileged a less threatening vision of gay lifestyle that conveniently aligned with the values of nouveau riche consumer citizenship.

## The Promotional Power of NBC Universal

As was previously mentioned, reverse repurposing was a topic that came up in discussion of the NBC and Vivendi Universal Entertainment merger. In particular, journalists addressed how shows may migrate amongst the entertainment properties owned by NBC and Vivendi Universal Entertainment. For example, McClintock and Dempsey noted:

Gaspin doesn't rule out reverse repurposing if USA comes up with a hit like "Monk" that NBC could use to shore up a weak night of primetime programming. When "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" became a runaway hit on NBC's wholly owned Bravo, NBC picked up episodes for its own schedule. (2004, para. 21)

At this point, NBC's immensely successful reverse repurposing with *Queer Eye* and the formation of NBC Universal worked together to generate commentary regarding the possibilities for cross-promotional synergy.

Then, speculations were confirmed when NBC Universal used its newfound weight to support the strategic goal of making all the channels in its portfolio work together (Martin, 2004b). Most notably, in an addendum added to contracts for program production companies, NBC secured the right to repeat a show ordered for one of its networks across any of its properties. This meant a show ordered for Bravo may also get repeat airing on Syfy Channel, USA, Trio, or the NBC broadcast network (Martin, 2004b). The contract addendum gave NBC Universal the right to repurpose broadcast network programming through recirculation on an array of cable properties, and to reverse repurpose cable programming via recirculation on the NBC broadcast network.

*Queer Eye* exemplifies how NBC's synergistic cross promotion has proven lucrative for both the primary and secondary networks airing program content. NBC Universal's full ownership of Bravo, SyFy, Trio, and USA, along with the synergistic relations between its cable outlets and the NBC broadcast network, were important components of the media conglomerate's trajectory in the 2000's. Overall, NBC Universal was moving toward seamless cross-channel initiatives, and Bravo president Jeff Gaspin helped lead the effort.

Following the formation of NBC Universal, Gaspin was promoted.<sup>96</sup> Gaspin's cumbersome new title – “President, cross-platform strategy, NBC Universal Entertainment; and executive VP, alternative series, long-form, specials, and program strategy NBC” – suggests his success with Bravo and *Queer Eye* played a major role in his promotion following the formation of NBC Universal. This is all the more likely given that Gaspin's promotional prowess with alternative programming (e.g. *Queer Eye*) and affinity for innovative marketing techniques (e.g. the first use of reverse repurposing at NBC and the second use of this tactic in the television industry) appear to be important components of his new responsibilities at NBC Universal (Romano 2004, p. 12).

Shortly after his promotion Gaspin reflected on the role of cross-promotional synergy at NBC Universal. Gaspin, as cited in *Variety*, explained:

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<sup>96</sup> Gaspin's success with Bravo and *Queer Eye* most likely played a major role in his promotion following the formation of NBC Universal. In fact, Gaspin's cumbersome new title – “President, cross-platform strategy, NBC Universal Entertainment; and executive VP, alternative series, long-form, specials, and program strategy NBC” – suggests that his promotional prowess with alternative programming (e.g. *Queer Eye*) and his affinity for innovative marketing techniques (e.g. the first use of reverse repurposing at NBC and the second use of this tactic in the television industry) will be important components of his new responsibilities at NBC Universal (Romano 2004, p. 12).

'Our strategy is not directed so much to benefit individual networks – an extra ratings points for any one network for any one episode are a perk, and a short-lived one, not to mention,' Gaspin says. 'What we're trying to do is take shows and make them hit shows. That's what this exposure is about – not about rating the repeat episodes.' (Martin, 2005, p. 18)

As noted above, exposure served as the primary goal of NBC's synergist cross-platform programming practices. Exposure supported the rise of hit shows at NBC Universal. Of course, hit shows on advertising-supported networks are determined via ratings. Accordingly, the dynamics amongst promotional synergy, ratings, and creating a hit show was of the utmost importance to NBC Universal, as it allowed the media conglomerate to pull in viable consumers for its advertising clients across multiple technological platforms (Meehan, 2005).

In closing, the use of reverse repurposing to launch *Queer Eye* is notable for at least two reasons. First, an unprecedented industry practice – recirculation of intellectual property from a cable network to a broadcast network – played a formative role in generating a hit show through exposure that produced buzz and increased ratings, the accepted industry standard for assessing the commercial success of a program (Meehan, 2005). Second, the successful implementation of this practice informed discursive and material practices surrounding the formation of NBC Universal. Let me elaborate on the second claim.

As we have seen, this distribution technique was used to generate ratings for secondary networks (e.g. NBC) looking to pull in viewers with buzz worthy programming (e.g. *Queer Eye*). Simultaneously, as a promotional tool, reverse repurposing generated ratings and pulled in new viewers for a primary network (e.g. Bravo) that ordered a series (e.g. *Queer Eye*) that executives within a media



conglomerate (e.g. NBC) were interested in hyping. This synergistic practice allowed NBC, a transnational media conglomerate, the opportunity to influence ratings via the recirculation of content across multiple platforms (Meehan, 2005).

Then, buzz surrounding NBC's implementation of reverse repurposing with *Queer Eye* became intertwined in industry discourse surrounding the merger between NBC and Universal. A practice that started as an effort to promote and generate ratings for a new cable property and its flashy makeover show ended up leaving an indelible mark on program promotion across NBC Universal's entertainment properties. Industry discourse suggests that Bravo influenced and reflected popular culture via the breakout hit *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, as Gaspin had hoped when he was named Bravo president (Brady, 2003). Moreover, Bravo and *Queer Eye* contributed to, shaped, and were shaped by the political economic realities of the digital media landscape.

### **Affluent Lifestyle Entertainment and Gender**

*Queer Eye* marked a commercial shift at Bravo that was built upon throughout the rest of the decade. Still, Bravo's rise as a network that targets an affluent and gendered audience needs to be contextualized. The discussion of *Queer Eye* in the preceding section was meant to situate Bravo under its new ownership at NBC in 2002, and then NBC Universal in 2004. *Queer Eye* served as a lens that allowed me to reflect on the political economic practices of Bravo under NBC ownership. I showed the formidable mark *Queer Eye* left on Bravo and the digital media landscape, during a time when the cable network was attempting to shed its highbrow arts programming model. Of course, *Queer Eye* contributed to

Bravo's rise as an affluent lifestyle network, and in the next chapter more of an effort is made to contextualize the role *Queer Eye* played in shaping Bravo's programming content.

Nonetheless, my archive suggests that Bravo became an affluent lifestyle network post *Queer Eye*. In fact, in 2004 when Jeff Gaspin passed the reigns to Lauren Zalaznick, Bravo still lacked a clear brand identity in the television industry. The remainder of this chapter engages Bravo's rise as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network, and it examines the role Lauren Zalaznick played in this process. First, it is necessary to situate affluent lifestyle entertainment. To do so requires a theoretical framework that engages the nature and scope of the commercial interests that permeate this type of gendered entertainment content.

Guy Debord, a founder of the Situationist International movement,<sup>97</sup> anticipated the valorization and religious fervor that could be ignited by consumer novelties in a climate driven by image and appearance when he wrote *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967. Twenty-one years later, Debord (1988) noted the new level of concentration and diffusion that characterized commodity relations in the emerging digital media landscape. I use affluent lifestyle entertainment to give visibility to the ever-expanding power of spectacle in the digital media landscape. I foreground the role brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence play in the commodity-driven gendered lifestyle that permeates affluent lifestyle entertainment. The work of media scholar Matt McAllister (2007)

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<sup>97</sup> The Situationist International (SI) is a movement that started in 1957. According to Marxist scholar Andy Merrifield (2005), SI "reacted against bourgeois culture and politics on the one hand and the sterile, austere functionalism of high modernism on the other (p. 27). They believed both of these entities had a debilitating impact on social space and the human spirit (Merrifield, 2005).

takes on a similar charge. In “Girls With a Passion for Fashion,” McAllister examines how the Bratz Brand “reflects and amplifies the association of young girls’ self-identity with commodities, and the joy many in this group experience while shopping and buying”(2007, p. 244). Like McAllister (2007), I am interested in the breadth and depth of consumer spectacle in gendered entertainment. My use of the term affluent lifestyle entertainment signifies an increasingly prominent form of gendered content that spans multiple text, platforms, genres, and industries. While my focus is on women’s programming, McAllister’s (2007) Debordian analysis of the Bratz brand shows how affluent lifestyle entertainment reaches young female viewers.

The primary feature of affluent lifestyle entertainment is a conspicuous approach to lifestyle that privileges image, appearance, and branding.<sup>98</sup> Sometimes this happens via the conspicuous production of food celebrities (e.g. *Top Chef*) or fashion design celebrities (*Project Runway*), other times, conspicuous production and conspicuous consumption are both present in program content. For example, *The Real Housewives* not only foregrounds the lives of economically privileged characters that conspicuously consume, it also manufactures, displays, and sells pop culture celebrities. Whether the primary focus is on consumption or production, a visible lifestyle grounded in branding, image, and appearance always maintains an enduring presence.

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<sup>98</sup> As noted in chapter two, “conspicuous lifestyle” is a broad term that includes “conspicuous consumption” and “conspicuous production. If I want to refer specifically to the role objects play as visible signifiers for social status I will use the term “conspicuous consumption.” Alternatively, if I seek to foreground the manufacturing and display of celebrity lifestyle, I will use the term “conspicuous production.”

Another essential component of affluent lifestyle entertainment is irony. Irony is a risky endeavor for at least two reasons. First, interpreting “ironic meaning” is not a given. For example, “ironic meaning” can be overlooked or interpreted in an unintended way. Second, interpreting an ironic scene requires rapid oscillation between literal and ironic meaning (Hutcheon, 1994). On the one hand, “ironic meaning” provides the space for viewers to reject the excessive portrayals of conspicuous consumption in *The Real Housewives* via their judgment of the ostentatious lead characters. On the other hand, the same viewer is figuratively or literally being sold gendered consumption practices via the “literal meaning.” Irony is a valuable aesthetic commodity that allows this gendered entertainment content to effectively tap into the cultural ambivalence surrounding capitalist patriarchy.<sup>99</sup>

As a cable network driven by conspicuous lifestyle and irony, Bravo serves as a valuable outlet to interrogate gendered entertainment. In fact, as we will see towards the end of the chapter Bravo’s rise as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network influences the programming on other female-oriented cable networks. It is not a coincidence, nor a conspiracy, that affluent lifestyle entertainment supported Bravo’s massive growth as a franchising and merchandising behemoth with immense cultural, political economic, and technological value. Instead, these two entities – the Bravo cable network and affluent lifestyle entertainment – have

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<sup>99</sup> Ostentatious branded entertainment grounded in conspicuous lifestyle, dysfunctional female characters, and conspicuous consumption are three examples of how irony is deployed as an aesthetic commodity in affluent lifestyle entertainment.

shaped and been shaped by the cultural ethos surrounding postfeminism and nouveau riche consumer citizenship in contemporary American culture.

Various feminist scholars have engaged the role irony and lifestyle play in postfeminist sensibilities (Arthurs, 2003; Douglas, 2010; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). I offer a new way to conceptualize this trend. I position affluent lifestyle entertainment as a form of “integrated spectacle” (Debord, 1988) that uses irony as a commodity to sell conspicuous lifestyle to gendered viewers. This form of integrated spectacle relies on digital convergence to manage gendered viewers who have value as consumers and producers. On the one hand, lifestyle interests are offered as novelties for viewers to consume. Here, branded entertainment is of the utmost importance. In fact, the most iconic forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment – for example, *Sex and the City*, *The Real Housewives*, and *Project Runway* – are strategically positioned entertainment franchises embedded in popular culture via merchandising and licensing campaigns that transcend texts, networks, platforms, and celebrities. On the other hand, viewers are a part of a brand community that they help to produce. The lifestyle interests that permeate these branded communities seamlessly support commodity-driven social relations. In the end, this form of integrated spectacle (Debord, 1988) calls upon gendered viewers as consumers and producers within a commodity-driven context that depoliticizes inequalities tied to gender, race, and class. Digital convergence not only supports these social relations; it also turns the viewers into valuable cybernetic commodities.

In the sections that follow, I trace Bravo's trajectory from 2004 through 2010. The iteration and reiteration of cultural discourse surrounding the content, practices, and structure of the digital media landscape rely on a vast array of texts that span multiple technological platforms. Undoubtedly, the Internet allows for an array of perspectives on the cultural and political economic practices of the digital media landscape. Nonetheless, some perspectives are privileged. In particular, newspaper and trade journals frequently use executive commentary to justify textual practices and industrial theorizing, despite the fact that this commentary serves the financial and cultural interests of the executives offering the commentary and their employers (Caldwell, 2006). From this perspective, entertainment executives play a formidable role in the cultural and political economic ethos of the digital media landscape. In fact, executive commentary surrounding the theoretical and practical aspects of cultural entertainment can and do function as sanctioned critical perspectives regarding the societal impact of media (Caldwell, 2006).

In the remainder of the chapter, I examine commentary on the cultural, technological, and political economic practices that developed at Bravo in the mid-to-late 2000s. Persistent themes that arose in newspaper and trade journal coverage with increasing frequency between 2004 and 2010 guided my decision to foreground the role this time period played in generating and solidifying Bravo's brand identity as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network. Lauren Zalaznick's perspective and/or the perspective of journalists commenting on her success at

Bravo are traced to bring to life Bravo's rise as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network.

### **Bravo's Unstable Brand Identity**

When Lauren Zalaznick replaced Jeff Gaspin as president for the Bravo cable network in 2004, Bravo was still seen as a highbrow arts programmer. Granted, Zalaznick's arrival at Bravo followed the groundbreaking success of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Still, *Queer Eye's* commercial appeal was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the phenomenal response to the makeover reality series enabled Bravo to bask in pop culture fame. On the other hand, *Queer Eye* was a significant departure from Bravo's highbrow arts programming. According to Zalaznick, when she took the helm as president Bravo had a:

Distinct brand that no longer fit with what was making it incredibly successful. There were costume dramas from England and then this thing called *Queer Eye*. It didn't match up. It was horrendous. (Ouellette, 2006, para. 15)

It is clear that in Zalaznick's mind Bravo lacked a stable brand identity. Moreover, there was pressure on her to ensure that Bravo did not become a one-hit wonder (Ouellette, 2006). Since Bravo's revenue was based on ratings, and Bravo's phenomenal ratings came about through the cable network's airing of *Queer Eye*, Zalaznick thought it was necessary to test and expand programming boundaries through edgy and smart signature content (Becker, 2005a).

Zalaznick purportedly used her popular culture background and artsy persona to brand Bravo as a cable network that catered to an educated, affluent, and upscale audience (Becker, 2005b). These two components – artsy persona and pop-culture background – are cited as important aspects of Zalaznick's "Bravo

brain” (Becker, 2005b). According to Zalaznick, this term is shorthand for her requirement that every aspect of Bravo “touch the outside world, become second nature” (Becker, 2005b, p. 24). One way we can see Zalaznick’s Bravo brain in action is through her realization that the *Queer Eye* cast served as templates for five lifestyle realms – design, food, fashion, beauty, and popular culture – that could be used to guide Bravo’s signature program content (Becker, 2005b). Here, we begin to get a glimpse of the primary role commodity relations played in the development of Bravo’s brand identity.

By 2006, Zalaznick was being recognized as the creative impetus behind Bravo’s rise as a destination for reality programming. For example, *Mediaweek* reflected on Bravo’s success under Zalaznick’s leadership:

In recent years under Zalaznick’s watch, Bravo has enjoyed audience surge and identity cachet with a string of reality hits, beginning with *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which she inherited, and continuing with *Project Runway*, *Top Chef* and *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. (Ouellette, 2006, para. 5)

As a result of this programming success, Bravo now reached eighty million homes and was experiencing significant increases in program viewership. For example, the first-quarter of 2006 was Bravo’s most-watched and highest-rated quarter.<sup>100</sup>

While Bravo was experiencing enormous commercial success under Zalaznick’s leadership, the executive claimed to be interested in an important

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<sup>100</sup> According to *Mediaweek*, Bravo averaged 282,000 viewers in the 18-49 primetime demographic in the first quarter 2006 “just a hair above first-quarter 2005 and 28 percent above fourth-quarter ‘05” (Ouellette 2006, para. 6). Amongst women in the same demographic Bravo was up 7 percent – first quarter ‘05 to first quarter ‘06 – and 48 percent, fourth quarter ‘05 to first quarter ‘06 (Ouellette 2006).



distinction found at Bravo that was rarely written about or talked about (Ouellette, 2006). Zalaznick positioned Bravo as:

The manifestation of that idealized place where gays and straights, blacks and whites, men and women, celebrities and noncelebrities all live together in a peaceful enclave where all that matters is quality, smarts, energy and drive. We never say it; we never cast for it. But this is the vision of what we see the world as. (Ouellette, 2006, para. 28)

Zalaznick's hyperbolic claim situated Bravo as an oasis that moved beyond stereotypical caricatures tied to class, race, gender, and sexuality to embrace the commonalities and differences within and between groups. Simultaneously, the claim ignored how the reified view of nouveau riche consumer citizenship advocated in Bravo's signature programming supports the production and reiteration of cultural hierarchies with significant material and discursive consequences. For example, the "gendered wealth" found in *The Real Housewives* franchise uses irony as an aesthetic commodity to sell conspicuous lifestyle. This commodity-driven vision of social relations supports the iteration of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship.<sup>101</sup>

### **Branding, Top Shelf Consumers, and Gendered Entertainment**

Overall, branded entertainment played a formative role in Bravo's rise as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network. The signature programming developed at Bravo under Zalaznick's reign relied on an ostentatious and brazen approach to branded entertainment that purportedly allowed media savvy viewers to enjoy vapid consumerism without "imagining that they're falling sway to the very forces

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<sup>101</sup> The case study of the *Real Housewives* in chapter seven addresses the role gendered wealth and postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship play in the popular franchise.

that make the show catnip for advertisers” (Dominus, 2008, para. 14). In contrast, *Queer Eye* was known for successful brand integrations that were situated as tasteful. For example, *Queer Eye’s* funny, engaging, effective, and original brand integrations seamlessly mixed “in products without ever stomping on the story” (Donaton, 2003, p. 14). Here my point is not to perpetuate a rigid distinction between authentic and inauthentic product integration. Quite the contrary, I am interested in how the discussion of Bravo’s branded entertainment shifted following *Queer Eye*.

As a signature program that defined Bravo, *Queer Eye* was known for authentic/tasteful product integration and friendly ironic mocking of the brands incorporated in the show. The makeover show purportedly did not rely on crass brand integrations, nor did it give blatant and lingering visibility to show sponsors via a faux spontaneity that was deemed awkward (Donaton, 2003). Interestingly, the flashy and explicit approach to branded entertainment deemed inauthentic in 2003 was situated as authentic by Lauren Zalaznick in *The New York Times Magazine* five years later (Dominus, 2008). Zalaznick argued that Bravo’s self-referential approach to television was not phony. Instead, Bravo’s conspicuous approach to branded entertainment was authentic because it is so obvious. This self-referential content purportedly let viewers in on the joke. Furthermore, Zalaznick placed significant value in personal responsibility and found debates over the role product integration plays in program content boring (Dominus, 2008).

Zalaznick's aesthetic commentary on product integration and her theorizing on the role personal responsibility plays in the social impact of television should not be dismissed. In fact, Zalaznick's concerted effort to: (1) position Bravo's flamboyant approach to product integration as an acceptable industry practice that is purportedly part of the ironic and layered approach to reality television and (2) to highlight the role personal responsibility plays in the social impact of the media, speaks to the formative role industry executives play in the process of theoretical, critical, and aesthetic deliberation (Caldwell, 2006). Zalaznick's effort to privilege the subversive potential of Bravo's branded entertainment and her nod to personal responsibility make sense given the emerging role that niche interests, authenticity, and irony played in the twenty-first century digital media landscape. The approach Zalaznick took was well suited to malleable marketing, and it allowed her to cultivate a brand relationship driven by commodified irony.<sup>102</sup>

Bravo's new approach to branded entertainment was purportedly authentic because it gave viewers access to the industry process of product integration and situated viewers as knowledgeable, media savvy consumers. For example, as noted in *The New York Times Magazine*:

'The Rachel Zoe Project' tags along with the celebrity stylist Rachel Zoe as she manages her team or shops for the right belt to capture her slouchy, carefully haphazard aesthetic. And madcap shopping sprees

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<sup>102</sup> This means that the exchange value of the ironic content could be used to suit different marketing needs. For example, when marketing ostentatious product placement to clients the exchange value could be tied to the role this practice will play reinforcing consumer practices. In contrast, when marketing ostentatious product placement to viewers the exchange value could be linked to the value of layered content that respects the intelligence of viewers.

are a recurring feature on Bravo's 'Real Housewives' series – which chronicles the competing, parenting and consorting and most of all, clothes-consuming of very wealthy women in Atlanta, New York City and Orange County. (Dominus, 2008, p. 38)

From tagging along with a celebrity stylist, to madcap shopping sprees, branded entertainment was a notable feature of Bravo's signature programming. The emphasis on fashion and consumption in Bravo's branded entertainment highlights how nouveau riche consumer citizenship grounded in a postfeminist ethos was used to effectively exploit the political economic and cultural realities of a postindustrial information society (Vavrus, 2002). As argued by Dow (1996) and Vavrus (2002), postfeminist ideology constructs audiences, not publics, and prepares individuals to exercise consumer choice, not to fight against oppressive conditions.

Under Zalaznick, Bravo's branded entertainment partnerships are known for their engaging, innovative, and successful matching of commodities and program content (Hampp, 2007). In fact, Bravo's signature programming serves as a specific type of franchised and branded media product that incorporates novelty and familiarity (Meehan, 2005).<sup>103</sup> Bravo's ostentatious take on branded entertainment is a specific type of ironic commodity that this cable network uses to sell conspicuous lifestyle to gendered viewers. Seamless brand integration is a viable route to selling commodities that is enormously alluring to clients interested in melding consumption and popular culture texts. Bravo's original

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<sup>103</sup> One the one hand, the different configuration of lifestyle interests and branded partnerships found in each Bravo series provides viewers with small novelties. One the other hand, the continuing presence of lifestyle interests and branded partnerships amongst Bravo's entire body of signature programming is a source of familiarity.

programming is marked by the use of branded entertainment as an aesthetic commodity. In that vein, Bravo's signature programming can be seen as an integrated spectacle that privileges the ceaseless circulation (Debord, 1988) of food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture.

Integration of content and consumption moves beyond specific signature programs at Bravo under Zalaznick's leadership. In fact, the symbiotic nature of the relations between entertainment content and consumer practices can be seen in the creation of Bravo Media. In 2007, the appeal of Bravo's unscripted content led the cable network to expand its presence beyond TV via a merchandising division and publishing arm ("At Deadline," 2007). The new subsidiary – Bravo Media – was created as a way to capitalize on and build upon the phenomenal success of Bravo's brand identity. This new venture allowed Bravo to exploit its brand cachet and the profitable nature of its signature programming within a new media platform.

From an industry perspective, the cachet affiliated with Bravo was grounded in the brand improvement and brand recall that purportedly came with product placements in the cable network's signature programs, on and off line. Brand improvement and brand recall are terms used to suggest that after seeing a product placement, viewers have more esteem for and are more likely to remember a commodity or service. Various agencies measure and monitor the impact of branded entertainment. The veracity of industry data is open to question. Still, content distributors use this information to sell their programming, and advertising clients expect this type of data and rely on it to make decisions. In

that vein, Bravo's claims regarding brand improvement and brand recall serve as a valuable resource that has the potential to generate revenue, and press coverage highlighted Bravo's stellar advertising climate.

For example, in 2006 when Toyota used branded entertainment on thirty shows that aired across six cable and six broadcast networks, *Mediaweek* highlighted that product integration on Bravo's *Top Chef* provided the highest levels of brand improvement and brand recall for the automotive manufacturer, as determined by IAG Research data (Ouellette, 2006). Similarly, *Advertising Age* journalist Andrew Hampp (2008a) noted the success of Bravo's branded entertainment. However, he was more emphatic about the value of brand integration in Bravo's reality programming. In fact, Hampp (2008a) started his article with the line, "Want consumers to remember your brand integration? Try a Bravo competition reality series" (p. 4). The journalist went on to laud Bravo, noting that the cable network was responsible for "five of the year's top 20 most-recalled hybrid ads" in 2007 (Hampp, 2008a, p. 4). The term "hybrid ads" refers to the combination of two selling techniques – product placement and commercials – being used at the same time. Hampp (2008a) situated Bravo's two-pronged approach to branded entertainment – a formula that combines advertisements during commercial breaks and product placement that weaves brands into programming – as instrumental to the cable network's success with viewer engagement and brand recall. Moreover, Hampp highlighted that Bravo recently augmented this formula by adding another technique, interactive voting. Bravo's interactive voting purportedly engaged "viewers and brands in a whole new way

by allowing marketers such as Brother International sewing machines to sponsor real-time voting for” *Project Runway* (Hampp, 2008a, p. 4). The use of interactive voting on *Project Runway* is one example of how Bravo called upon viewers to act on behalf of integrated spectacle (Debord, 1967/2012).

Bravo’s brand identity as a reality television venue grounded in overt branded entertainment that showcased irony and conspicuous lifestyle was well established by 2008, as was the ability of Bravo’s branded entertainment to engage, measure, and monitor its gendered consumers across multiple technological platforms. Across periodical coverage, Lauren Zalaznick’s leadership was situated as the factor that enabled Bravo to deliver female affluencers to advertisers. This happened across multiple technological platforms (e.g. blogs and a mobile wireless site) that presumably aired desirable program content.

For example, Zalaznick touted the traffic on Bravo’s mobile wireless site, as this meant viewers were “waiting for the bus and checking out ‘Desperate Housewives [of Orange County]’ photo galleries on their phones” (Hampp, 2007, p. 2). As was previously mentioned, Zalaznick’s goal was for Bravo to infiltrate the outside world in such a way that it became second nature (Becker, 2005b). Through new technological platforms Zalaznick accomplished her aim. In this instance, Bravo entered the flow and rhythm of a viewer’s day-to-day life via *The Real Housewives*. This technological diffusion of content vividly illustrates how new machinery is used to expand the confines of integrated spectacle (Debord, 1988).

Simultaneously, the interactive mediums used to access/purchase Bravo’s desirable content are extremely conducive to advanced surveillance and

monitoring techniques. Debord (1988) was attentive to the role surveillance played in supporting the goals of integrated spectacle when he wrote *Comments of the Society of the Spectacle*. Still, data management capabilities were drastically different in the late 1980s. Accordingly, he argued that “surveillance would be much more dangerous had it not been led by its ambition for absolute control over everything to the point where it encountered difficulties created by its own progress” (Debord, 1988, p. 29). Unfortunately, efforts to monitor, measure, and direct bodies is no longer an insatiable ambition limited by its own progress. This is apparent in at least two ways. First, convergence across multiple technological platforms stabilizes and directs the relations amongst content, services, and audience members (Schiller, 2000). Second, digital convergence has made the ability to collect, organize, package, market and sell cybernetic commodities a much easier task (Meehan, 1984; Mosco, 2010; Andrejevic, 2004).

Bravo’s effort to direct relations amongst content, services, and audience members can be seen in the second annual edition of a flashy business-to-business publication initiated under Zalaznick’s leadership. In the 2009/2010 edition of *Bravo Affluence*, Zalaznick situated Bravo as a premium outlet for advertisers interested in an audience that consumes content with praise and passion. “Bravo your Brand” was the slogan the executive touted in the flashy publication. Bravo purportedly offered the most significant engagement between consumers and advertisers, and “Bravo your Brand” was a call out to advertisers. The “secret to Bravo’s success” was “paring quality content, audience, and products to form



cable's best, most effective partnerships," according to the executive (*Bravo Affluencer*, 2009/2010, p. 5).

The *Bravo Affluencer* highlighted the cable network's commitment to engaging top-shelf consumers in every way conceivable through a multi-layered and exclusive approach. The four-dimensional (4D) approach to consumption laid out in the 2009/2010 issue of *Bravo Affluencer* started with attention, and was followed by interactivity, experience, and sharing. First, Bravo used various techniques to attract viewer attention. For example, branded entertainment for Nexxus hair products on the hair stylist competition *Shear Genius* included: cobranding the show with the client's product by exclusively stocking the *Shear Genius* hair salon with Nexxus; having branded challenges judged by a Nexxus representative written into *Shear Genius*; and the use of custom vignettes highlighting the benefits of Nexxus products during commercial pods (*Bravo Affluencer*, 2009/2010). Second, Bravo relied on viewer interactivity (e.g. online voting, text messaging, and infoframe). Infoframe – a technique that uses part of the television screen while a show is airing to pose questions to viewers – was purportedly used in *Shear Genius* to generate interactivity between viewers and the Nexxus brand. The Bravo experience was the third component. This included streaming and live events that allowed viewers to engage with the products advertised on Bravo. For example, "Consumer Blowout" was a live event in Time Square that allowed viewers to experience *Shear Genius* and Nexxus (*Bravo Affluencer*, 2009/2010). Finally, sharing included things like providing product samples and viewing parties. For Nexxus, party kits packed with various Nexxus

products were distributed to *Shear Genius* fans for at-home finale viewing parties. These parties were an effort to reinforce the power of the partnership between Nexxus and *Shear Genius*, and they offered “an added benefit: getting select Nexxus products in Affluencer hands, for the purpose of sharing/building buzz among their friends” (*Bravo Affluencer*, 2009/2010, p. 10).

Bravo’s 4D approach converges consumption and entertainment across four distinct layers of communication that viewers use to engage content across multiple platforms. Additionally, Bravo’s desirable programming elicits interest in entertaining personality portraits driven by rampant consumerism. Still according to industry reports, Zalaznick did not believe she puts vapid consumerism on display to be mocked or emulated. Instead, she produced a type of social anthropology via cultural texts worthy of analysis (Dominus, 2008). As we know, these two things are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, Zalaznick’s claimed they are.

Zalaznick’s use of a rejection/substitution theory is a common perspective on irony that has significant cultural resonance. Of course, a simple semantic inversion driven by the incompatibility between “ironic” and “literal” meaning ignores how irony functions as a complex discursive strategy (Hutcheon, 1994). In reality, Bravo’s ostentatious branded entertainment is a both a demystifying and authentic experience that allows audience members to reflect on the excess of capitalist patriarchy (ironic meaning) and a duplicitous and effective route to selling a gendered lifestyle grounded in fashion, food, beauty, design, and popular culture (literal meaning). As we will see, Bravo’s ability to package and sell “female

affluencers” suggests there is significant value in using irony as aesthetic commodity to sell conspicuous lifestyle.

In the mid-2000s, Bravo targeted gay males and women. Still, under Zalaznick’s reign Bravo took a decidedly new interest in a gendered audience. In fact, by 2007 trade journal coverage frequently highlighted Bravo’s attention to affluent women. For example, *Mediaweek* ran an article entitled “Bravo Targets a More Affluent Female Audience.” The trade journal noted that Bravo was using a new Thursday night line-up to target young and affluent females. As noted in *Mediaweek*:

At the upfront press lunch in New York last week, Bravo president Lauren Zalaznick characterized the network’s upscale female demo as “affluencers”: women with higher education degrees, plush salaries (median income: \$75,000) and trend-spotter sensibilities. (Crupi 2007, para. 2)

The attention Zalaznick afforded to the trend-setting sensibilities, salary, and education of female viewers at an upfront press lunch (the upfronts are an important industry event that unite distributors and advertisers once a year) is a specific example that illustrates how gendered consumers are being sold to potential clients. Similarly in 2008, the education levels and household income of Bravo’s female viewers were highlighted. In this instance *Adweek* noted:

According to Nielsen N Power for the third-quarter ’08, the women 18-49 who make up the bulk of Bravo/Oxygen’s prime-time audience are more likely to have four years of college under their belt; moreover, nearly half of those viewers report annual household incomes of at least \$100,000. (Crupi, 2008, para. 3)

Attention to the psychographic, demographic, and lifestyle attributes of Bravo’s female viewers align with the increasingly prevalent role measurement and

monitoring practices play in the digital media landscape. Moreover, discourse surrounding the spending power of educated and well-off women corresponds to the ethos of postfeminism that characterizes a great deal of popular culture discourse on women. In fact, even when politics is the topic of news coverage there is a tendency to rely on a gendered trope that foregrounds women's role as consumers (Vavrus, 2002).

For example, Mary Douglas Vavrus highlights the role postfeminism plays in coverage of women and politics in contemporary society. Most notably, she discusses the role the demographic, psychographic, and lifestyle attributes of the soccer mom play in electoral politics. While her concern is situated in news coverage, it is still applicable. In both instances the constructed nature of a gendered audience commodity contributes to and "reinforces beliefs about the appropriateness of women as being apolitical and well suited to the individual fortresses of their suburban homes" (Vavrus, 2002, p. 126).

To further support this claim, I will highlight how Zalaznick's ability to reach out to influential, affluent, and educated women between 18 and 49 years old was situated. Zalaznick, a highly successful female executive, was frequently positioned in news coverage as an exemplary female affluencer. A 2008 *New York Times* article highlights Zalaznick's purported identification with prosperous urban women:

She is wealthy, well-educated and attentive to fashion, food and pop culture. At 44, she's inside Bravo's demographic of viewers from 18 to 49, and her opinions have considerable influence on the people around her. She is, in short an 'affluencer' – a gimmicky word Ms. Zalaznick said she made up, combining affluence and influence – to describe Bravo's core audience. (Carter, 2008, p. 1)

In the excerpt above the journalist referred to Zalaznick as an affluencer based on her education, influence on those around her, and engagement in all things Bravo: food, fashion, design, beauty, and popular culture. As an upscale urban woman, with an undergraduate degree in semiotics from Brown and a formidable career as an NBC executive, Zalaznick resembles the vision of White gendered wealth found in Bravo's signature content. Moreover, coverage of Bravo and Zalaznick contributed to a classed vision of public/private life for women.

Thus far, I have examined the role Lauren Zalaznick played in the articulation of Bravo's brand identity following *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Other scholars have commented on Bravo's attention to affluence. For example, Erin Cople Smith's 2012 research on the Bravo cable network relied on trade publication and marketing research to illustrate how Bravo discursively constructed the "affluencer" audience commodity. Smith's (2012) findings, which rely on a much smaller array of industry sources, do not attend to the specific role gender played in the articulation of Bravo's audience commodity in the late 2000s.

My mid-level industry analysis attends to how Lauren Zalaznick contributed to, shaped, and was shaped by cultural expectations surrounding women, affluence, and consumption. The trope of the female affluencer highlights the role lifestyle interests and consumer practices play in the lives of women. The inordinate attention to these realms shapes and is shaped by the legacy of capitalist patriarchy that situates how we understand women's responsibilities as consumers and citizens. This legacy means that recognition claims grounded in the emancipatory nature of female consumption are extremely precarious, as they

tend to further reify a collective identity grounded in the seemingly natural status of the gendered consumer (Fraser, 2000). Postfeminism nouveau riche consumer citizenship offers a sexed subjectivity grounded in self-pleasing, hyper-sexuality, and affluent lifestyle. In a political economic and cultural climate plagued by cultural hierarchies in which gender is inextricably tied to class, race, and sexual orientation, female viewers are being oriented to private interests and self-governance, two neoliberal values that do not fit well with collective efforts to challenge capitalist patriarchy. Gender and affluence are of the utmost importance to Bravo, and as will see in the next section, Bravo engaged in comprehensive qualitative research and crafted a multi-tiered business-to-business campaign in order to socially construct their valuable audience commodity.

### **Commodifying the Affluencers**

Bravo's trajectory in the 2000s is emblematic of the role market power and commercial growth have played and continue to play in the overarching institutional identity of the digital media landscape (Schiller, 2000). Cable television, along with the array of digital technologies that followed the influx and massive growth of cable networks in the 1980s/1990s, was situated as revolutionary to how content was produced, distributed, consumed and stored. Most notably, channel capacity and digital convergence were touted as radical innovations that provided a solution to the limitations of the commercial imperatives that situate television (Streeter, 1997). In reality, cable networks like Bravo have taken on, fine-tuned, and enhanced the use of measurement and

monitoring techniques to package, market, and sell their audience commodity to prospective advertisers.

Audience commodification played a salient role in Bravo's commercial growth. Under Lauren Zalaznick's leadership Bravo sold an influential, affluent, and engaged audience to prospective advertising clients. For example, in 2008 Bravo used the "Bravo – Meet the Affluencers" campaign to sell its valuable audience segment to advertisers. While this promotional effort began for Bravo in spring 2008, it still remains a staple of Bravo's business-to-business advertising in 2013. Here I examine: (1) how the affluencers came to be, who they are, and the value this audience segment purportedly has for Bravo's clients and (2) the implementation and impact of the "Bravo – Meet the Affluencers" campaign. Moreover, by discussing this campaign, we better understand the role measurement and monitoring play in the process of audience commodification (Mosco, 2010).

The affluencer campaign was a response to Bravo's fractured brand identity following the massive commercial success of *Queer Eye*. When Zalaznick took the helm in 2004, she sought to turn Bravo into a cable network known for unscripted programming grounded in five lifestyle interests, as previously noted: beauty, fashion, food, design, and popular culture. However, three years later, still lacked a clear brand identity and audience profile. For example, in 2007 Bravo conducted in-depth interviews with industry personnel that indicated media buyers and planners were "uncertain as to who the Bravo viewer" was, due to the cable network's shift in programming ("Bravo – Meet the Affluencers," 2009).

Ultimately, Bravo's shift to glossy unscripted content presented a challenge: professionals from the advertising industry could not easily identify the exchange value of Bravo's target audience. In response, Bravo worked with Lieberman Research Worldwide to fine-tune its strategic selling proposition. The process started with the identification of salient demographic, psychographic, and lifestyle variables of Bravo's audience commodity. These variables included, for example, "the role TV entertainment played in their lives, their cable entertainment preferences, their attitudes about and comfort with new media technologies" and living circumstances ("Bravo – Meet the Affluencers," 2009, p. 2). What is of interest and political economic significance is the role that measurement and monitoring played as the starting point for Bravo's research. Here we see that audience data, not the program content, is of the utmost value. The program content is just a means to an end. The ultimate commodity being sold is consumers that means Bravo needed to assess the demographic, psychographic, and lifestyle attributes of its viewers (Meehan, 2005; Mosco, 2010).

After identifying, defining, and categorizing the exchange value of their audience commodity, Bravo situated itself as a premium lifestyle destination grounded in design, food, fashion, beauty, and pop culture. Bravo's network concept statement was grounded in the inventive and influential nature of its signature programming. This content sought to: provide authentic behind-the-scenes access to creative processes; highlight a different side of celebrity lifestyle; and shake up how fame, Hollywood, style, and media were conceptualized ("Bravo – Meet the Affluencers," 2009). Bravo's network concept statement and additional



qualitative research undertaken with Sterling Brands were used to develop a nuanced understanding of Bravo's key audience segments.

The Bravo/Sterling Brands research team sought to preserve Bravo's upscale demographic while allowing the cable network to evolve in ways that would enhance the relations between the Bravo brand and its core audience. Viewer characteristics play a salient role in the value afforded to an audience commodity for distribution outlets and advertisers. In fact, feminist political economist Eileen Meehan (2005) argues:

The general population and the individual television viewer is irrelevant to the market for consumers. Advertisers demand high-quality consumers – a people with disposable income, desire, and retail access to buy name brands frequently, loyally, and impulsively. (p. 117)

Since Bravo was interested in selling their audience commodity to advertisers, the goal was to increase the presence of high-income consumers that aligned with the trend-setting and buzz worthy nature of Bravo's signature content ("Bravo – Meet the Affluencers," 2009).

The "Bravo – Meet the Affluencers" case study touted that the research undertaken in coordination with Sterling Brands enabled "marketing, development, and programming to grab an even stronger hold on a target audience that was – by design – among the most affluent, influential consumers watching television" (2009, p. 2). Here we can see how the demand for consumers influences program content, as the identification and definition of a target audience directed development and programming at Bravo. Together, the research

projects undertaken with Lieberman Research Worldwide and Sterling Brands generated a:

Blueprint for emphasizing the attributes that would best press these consumers' buttons. That formula is proprietary, but by the end of 2008, some of it had widely been written about in the press: an overall high-end sheen on production, talented and motivated characters in high status fields and cosmopolitan locales, and inspirational stories about individuals who start trends rather than follow them. ("Bravo – Meet the Affluencers," 2009, p. 2)

As noted in the excerpt above, Bravo's research led to a proprietary formula. The language used to discuss this formula is indicative of the role consumption played in the trajectory of Bravo's brand identity. From the consumer button-pushing blueprint and high-end production sheen, to the trend setting characters, cosmopolitan locations, and high status fields, Bravo sought to generate a brand identity that gave advertisers a viable reason to increase their investment in this cable brand.

The need for a message that highlighted valuable viewer traits (e.g. audience engagement and salary) and signature programming benefits (e.g. the high-end production sheen and aspirational situations) led to the creation of the affluencers. According to the case study, these tech savvy and brand/trend conscious individuals have above average consumer purchasing power and rely on multiple media platforms to expand their individual experiences with entertainment content. In the time period preceding the introduction of the "Bravo – Meet the Affluencers" campaign, Bravo conducted various studies that were used

to tout the influential nature of Bravo's core audience,<sup>104</sup> the impact of brand integrations in Bravo programming,<sup>105</sup> and viewer affinity for their chosen programming network.<sup>106</sup>

The "Bravo – Meet the Affluencers" campaign ran from April through June 2008. The campaign included, but was not limited to, an interactive show, the launch of a new online destination, and a print promotional campaign. The live interactive road show spanned six major markets – New York, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, and LA – and used actors to bring the affluencers to life. In fact, the actors in the traveling road show were used to demonstrate the kind of consumer the affluencers were and the benefit these consumers offered potential clients ("Bravo – Meet the Affluencers," 2009). The effort here was to sell consumers or Bravo affluencers to prospective clients through a theatrical realm that brought Bravo's audience commodity to life.

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<sup>104</sup> Mediamark Research and Simmons Research used consumer databases to conduct syndicated measurement regarding the influence of the Bravo audience. The purported results: "Bravo viewers from these panels were identified as some of the most influential on cable across different metrics. Bravo's audience beat its competitive set for agreeing with statements like 'My friends come to me before buying' and 'I'm always on of the first to try new products'" ("Bravo – Meet the Affluencers," 2009, p. 3).

<sup>105</sup> The Bravo research team conducted pre and post studies to assess brand integration using IAG Research, Dynamic Logic and the internal television panel at NBC. The results showed "Bravo viewers were so engaged with the programming, they had higher brand opinion and purchase intent for the integrated brands. Ex: the Nexxus hair care brand that was heavily featured during the Bravo program Shear Genius saw +180% higher levels of purchase intent among viewers post integration" ("Bravo – Meet the Affluencers," 2009, p. 3).

<sup>106</sup> Bravo and Mediamark Research conducted "a proprietary national survey measuring the affinity viewers had for the networks they watched" (Bravo – Meet the Affluencers," 2009, p. 3). The purported goal of the study was to determine why Bravo had such successful product integration and strong viewer engagement. The answer "'affluencers' had a much stronger than average affinity for Bravo and viewed it to be high quality. For example, Bravo viewers were 33% more likely to say for Bravo, that for other networks' viewers were for their network, that, 'No matter what I'm doing I always find time to watch'" ("Bravo – Meet the Affluencers 2009," p. 3).

Simultaneously, The *Bravo Affluencer* magazine<sup>107</sup> was distributed to pique the interest of the advertising community, and Affluencers.com was launched to enable current and prospective clients “to experience 4D and get the latest and greatest on Bravo Media” (“Bravo – Meet the Affluencers,” 2009, p. 4).<sup>108</sup> As noted earlier in the chapter, Bravo’s 4D approach to selling products and services in its signature programming capitalizes on branded entertainment grounded in lifestyle interest/consumer practices that span multiple technological platforms. The print promotional campaign relied on various trade publications (e.g. *Advertising Age*) and newspapers (e.g. *The New York Times*) to target the advertising community. For example, *Advertising Age* and *Ad Week* had “geo-targeted cover wraps to specific sales categories” (“Bravo – Meet The Affluencers,” 2009, p. 4). Additionally, the front page for *Advertising Age* was a mock cover with the affluencers, and the *Affluencer* magazine was poly-bagged to the back of the trade publication

Bravo assessed the general impact of the campaign<sup>109</sup> via advertising sales, awareness amongst buyers and planners, spill over in the consumer realm, and

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<sup>107</sup> *The Affluencer Magazine* is described as an 80 page print publication “that communicated to media agencies and advertiser clients the breadth of the Bravo brand including programming information, digital applications, consumer products, and events, and it communicated the ‘Affluencer Effect’ in further detail” (Bravo – Meet the Affluencers,” 2009, p. 4).

<sup>108</sup> According to the case study, the “dedicated trade Website” affluencers.com provided information and downloads regarding the affluencer campaign and Bravo Media (“Bravo – Meet The Affluencers,” 2009, p. 4).

<sup>109</sup> The specific influence of the “Bravo – Meet the Affluencers” campaign was indicated via business-to-business marketing efforts that highlighted the reach of the campaign in the realms of agency interaction and promotional materials distributed and/or accessed. For agency interaction, the number of attendees for agency presentations (1,000) and agency breakfasts (600) was noted, as was the number of participants for the agency dinner program (500). Print promotions included: the distribution of 28,000 *Affluencer* magazines, print impressions (1.5 million) and outdoor media impressions (5 million).

segment ownership. First, national advertising sales revenue for Bravo Media increased 32% over 2007 and 74% over 2006. Additionally, “revenue growth outpaced large P18-49 audience growth (23% vs. 2007 and 34% vs. 2006) indicating quality of audience premium paid by advertisers” (“Bravo – Meet The Affluencers,” 2009, p. 5). Second, post interviews purportedly indicated Bravo was at the top of the list for media buyers/planners interested in reaching trendy adults. Evidence of affluencer spillover in the consumer realm was also used to substantiate the general impact of the campaign:

Spill-over of the Affluencer consumer brand into national vernacular: The term Affluencer, which was created and trademarked by Bravo, now has its own website, produces 3.8 million results when searched on Google, and by late 2008 had appeared in college marketing texts. (“Bravo – Meet the Affluencers” 2009, p. 5)

The spill over of the term “affluencer” referenced above lacked the necessary data to support its veracity. For example, that the term “affluencer” produces 3.8 million results when searched on Google tells us nothing, since we do not know how many hits the term would have generated prior to Bravo’s promotional campaign.

The last general campaign impact is the purported “segment ownership” Bravo had of the term affluencer in popular culture. Two articles – one published in *The New York Times Magazine* and the other published in *Entertainment Weekly* – were used to support this claim, and the “Bravo – Meet the Affluencers” case study offered a short paragraph explaining the articles:

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Multiplatform promotions included banner impressions (5,892,026) and sweepstake entries (1,130 including texts and online entries) (“Bravo – Meet The Affluencers,” 2009).

*The New York Times Magazine*, in a cover story published the week of the Presidential election, featured Bravo President Lauren Zalaznick in a 10,000 word article titled: *The Affluencer*. Weeks later, when *Entertainment Weekly* named Zalaznick one of the smartest people in television, it called her “A Savvy tastemaker, courting affluent, educated viewers (exactly the kind advertisers love) with Bravo’s reality gold mines.” (2009, p. 5)

The paragraph above was the sole evidence provided to establish that Bravo had segment ownership of the term “affluencers.” While the linking of the term affluencer and Bravo president Lauren Zalaznick in *The New York Times Magazine* and *Entertainment Weekly* is noteworthy for potential clients, it in no way establishes that Bravo had segment ownership of the term “affluencer.”

Still, the claims made by Bravo allow us to reflect on the value afforded to things like search engine results and news coverage by industry professionals interested in assessing, tapping into, and shaping popular culture. Bravo’s declarations appear exaggerated. Nonetheless, newspaper and trade journal articles from my historical archive evidence a link between Bravo and the term “affluent” and/or “affluencer” in the final years of the 2000s. Moreover, as work on my dissertation progressed from 2008 through 2014, organic Internet searches on Google were more likely to offer a larger variety of options when I combined “Bravo” and “affluent,” “affluence,” or “affluencer.” An “organic internet search” on Goggle provides a list of sites determined based upon a proprietary formula that assesses and weights the presence and position of the sites on the list Google generates (Turow, 2013). Accordingly, “a site that reflects the search terms and has many high-reputation sites linking to it will appear higher on the organic search results compared to a sites with fewer such links” (Turow, 2013, p. 101). In

that vein, the socially constructed nature of Bravo's audience commodity slowly and methodically attained a seemingly natural status in the digital media landscape.

Overall, the "Bravo – Meet The Affluencers" campaign sheds light on the role measurement and monitoring techniques used to package, market, and sell an audience commodity play for cable networks in the twenty-first century. Through this case study, we are given access to some of the time-consuming and costly industry processes that are used to generate a network brand identity, and the primary role consumption and audience commodification play in this process. This campaign was directed toward industry professionals – advertisers and/or media planner and buyers – interesting in buying commercial real estate to access consumers (Meehan, 2005). Bravo's audience commodity, and to a lesser degree its program content, were used to attract prospective advertisers interested in consumer measurement and monitoring. From viewer preferences, practices and attitudes, to living circumstances and psychographic variables, Bravo started with the goal of profiling and defining the attitudinal segments that offered the cable network the most opportunity for growth.

### **Selling the Affluencers**

*Advertising Age's* 2008 Cable Guide was one way Bravo sold the affluencers to industry professionals. *Advertising Age's* annual Cable Guide issue is a business-to-business promotional tool that cable networks use to convey the value of their

brand identity and audience segment to the advertising industry.<sup>110</sup> According to an *Advertising Age* promotional sheet:

The 2011 Cable Guide is the perfect resource for media buyers and planners as they allocate their budgets. The guide is designed for your network to showcase highlights and new programming, spotlight your audience and demonstrate how your cable brand can carry a marketer's message directly to the audience they need to reach. Bring your network to the forefront of decision makers' minds when they are buying TV ad space. ("Cable Guide," 2011)

The excerpt above situates the annual Cable Guide as a way for cable channels to showcase their brand, audience, and program content for planners and media buyers. Bravo sought to highlight the valuable attributes the affluencers offered in 2008 when the cable network engaged in business-to-business advertising in the well-known trade publication. In fact, Bravo's multiple marketing efforts in the 2008 Cable Guide – geographically targeted cover wraps, the *Affluencer* magazine poly-bagged to the back of the trade publication, and two different mock covers – led the cable network to claim they “owned the 4/28 Annual Cable Guide Issue of *Ad Age*” (“Bravo – Meet The Affluencers,” 2009, p. 4). Here I discuss the two *Advertising Age* mock covers (figure 1) that were used as a part of the “Bravo – Meet the Affluencers” campaign.

Business-to-business advertisements for television are used to sell things like ratings, program content, brand identity, and a network's audience commodity to prospective advertisers. The two *Advertising Age* mock covers presented below

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<sup>110</sup> The 2011 Cable Guide package is \$30,950. For this price the cable network gets 25 reprints of the Cable Guide and two full pages in the annual special issue (a 4-color full page advertisement and an adjacent advertorial marketing profile that is also a full page), as well as various online services at Adage.com (“Cable Guide,” 2011). The 2011 Cable Guide handout claims that 80% of agency executives and marketers “cite the Cable Guide as a useful tool in doing their jobs” (results based on *Advertising Age's* reader survey for the 2010 Cable Guide).



(figure 1) were used to sell Bravo's audience commodity (the affluencers) and brand identity (the affluencer effect) to potential clients and media planners/buyers. Simultaneously these advertisements generated and relied on cultural meaning that has important significance for our understanding of nouveau riche consumer citizenship in contemporary America. Here I presume the political economic and cultural role of advertising is intertwined. In that vein, advertising is much more than a tool used to move products off shelves. In fact, advertising is an integral component of contemporary culture, and advertising texts engage, appropriate, shape, and transform our discursive and material reality (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill, 2005).

The two *Advertising Age* mock covers presented below (figure 1) use verbal and visual imagery to sell the affluencers and the Bravo affluencer effect. It is necessary to unpack what is being sold to unearth how the cultural meaning generated in these advertisements contributes to the iteration of nouveau riche consumer citizenship. First, who are the affluencers, and how are they being sold? The visual imagery suggests that the affluencers are being represented as brand/trend-conscious individuals with consumer purchasing power. Their purchasing power is indicated by the fact they are engaged in the act of consumption.

Figure 6: Advertising Age Mock Covers



In the movie box office setting the male affluencer has his wallet out and is paying for movie tickets, while in the car dealership the female affluencer is reaching to take the keys for her new car from the car salesman. The female affluencer – dressed in classic black and white with a necklace, sunglasses, and a purse in both advertisements – is situated as a brand/trend-conscious individual. Moreover, in the movie theater setting the female affluencer is engaged in a cell phone conversation to show her interest in technology. Prospective advertising clients and media planners/buyers are being given a window into the lifestyle of the affluencers via the visual imagery that characterizes these advertisements. While I used window as a metaphor, the visual imagery in the advertisement suggests something different. As a viewer we are not looking at people through a window; we are looking at dolls in a package. The toy box serves as a metaphor that suggests how Bravo has packaged their audience for potential clients.

The affluencer dolls being sold in the advertisement are reminiscent of Ken and Barbie. They seem to be Bravo's twenty-first century version of these iconic dolls: fashionable, tech savvy, affluent, and influential. Moreover, they can easily be situated as a White heterosexual couple. Here it is useful to reflect on the contradiction between how Bravo is marketed to viewers, as opposed to clients. For viewers, Bravo was purportedly a space appreciative of diversity that moved beyond stereotypical caricatures tied to class, race, gender, and sexuality. In fact, as we saw earlier in this chapter, Zalaznick presented Bravo as an idealized space for viewers that embraced the commonalities and differences amongst identity groups (Ouellette, 2006). In contrast, this business-to-business advertisement does sell a racially and ethnically diverse audience commodity. To the contrary, potential clients are being sold a reified vision of White heterosexual affluence.

The visual imagery shows dolls being sold in a three-dimensional purple box. As indicated by the logo on the left side of the packaging, these consumers/dolls and the affluencer effect are for sale by their producer and distributor, Bravo Media. The textual imagery on the box tells us important things about the dolls and their manufacturer. Most notably, the dolls come with the affluencer effect, which includes "intent to purchase" and "powerful ROI action." The aforementioned claims link buying the affluencer dolls with product purchases that support return on investment. Then a talk bubble with the words "Remember? We saw it on Bravo" is used to associate the product being sold in the advertisement with the "intent to purchase" and "powerful ROI action" that comes with every set of affluencers sold by Bravo Media.

At the broadest level, the entire advertisement can be seen as a metaphor that capitalizes on the industry presumption that an audience is a commodity that is sold by networks to advertisers. More specifically, the imagery and text within the advertisement suggest that a specific manufacturer is selling a package with dolls that have new and improved attributes. At this level, the doll box and what it contains is a metaphor that is being used to illustrate Bravo Media's ownership of, and ability to package and sell, the affluencers and the affluencer effect. The affluencer's specific attributes are what make them valuable. These attributes – engagement, intent to purchase, economic status, and influence on the consumption practices of others – are assessed via measurement and monitoring practices that are of fundamental importance to the cybernetic nature of audience commodification. Cybernetic commodification is a term that speaks to the role measurement/monitoring processes play in the production of the audience commodity. Mosco (2010, p. 152) argues it is necessary to foreground commodification as a process “that connects a range of practices in a spiral of expanding exchange value” and then, within this general framework, to examine the use of new measurement and monitoring techniques that expand how media commodities are produced.

Bravo's long evolution highlights the increasingly prominent role digital capitalism has come to play in the media landscape. Bravo moved from a cultural arts cable network that offered bourgeois consumer citizens access to highbrow arts content in the free market, to an affluent lifestyle entertainment network that provided nouveau riche consumer citizens access to food, fashion, beauty, design,

and popular culture. Affluent lifestyle entertainment's cultural and political economic value derives from using irony as an aesthetic commodity to sell gendered content, services, and products across multiple technological platforms. Seamless convergence of consumption and entertainment across multiple technological platforms aligns well with advanced surveillance and monitoring techniques. In fact, affluent lifestyle entertainment allows content distributors to effectively exploit the political economic (e.g. cybernetic commodification) and cultural (e.g. the presumed emancipatory value of self-branding, consumer choice, and technological interactivity) realities of a postindustrial information society (Dow 1996; Vavrus, 2002). Beyond Bravo, cable networks like Lifetime, E!, Style, MTV, and Oxygen, all offer affluent lifestyle entertainment. In particular, Oxygen – a sister network to Bravo that NBC Universal acquired in the late 2000s – provides additional insight into gendered entertainment that targets engaged, influential, and affluent female viewers beyond traditional media realms. The next section examines NBC Universal's acquisition of Oxygen and the media conglomerates formation of Women@NBCU to shed light on Bravo's status as a gendered cable network.

### **Bravo, Oxygen, and Women@NBCU**

Oxygen and Bravo are two female cable networks owned by NBC Universal that formed strong brand identities under Zalaznick's leadership. In the late 2000s, Oxygen relied on "Life Out Loud" as a tagline to target independent-minded young women with an anything-goes attitude. Similarly, "Watch What Happens" was Bravo's call out to affluent, media savvy female trendsetters with their pulse on the

finger of popular culture (Schneider & Adalian, 2008). Bravo and Oxygen are two of the three female-oriented media properties used to form Women@NBCU. The Women@NBCU marketing initiative purportedly “reaches all women across all demographics, including the most affluent and desirable on television. A demographic category much sought-after by advertisers, women control 80% of all consumer purchasing across every brand category” (“NBC Universal Launches Women@NBCU,” 2008, p. 1). The initiative, which spans female-oriented content and entertainment properties across NBC Universal, highlights the role women play in influencing purchasing decisions and dominating “consumer purchasing across every brand category” (“NBC Universal Launches Women@NBCU,” 2008, p. 1). As can be seen, the underlying cultural discourse that grounds this initiative relies on, sustains, and perpetuates a problematic binary between the male and female consumer.

The intertextual references found across trade journal and newspaper coverage of Bravo, Oxygen, and, Women@NBCU offer insight into the ubiquitous nature of industry discourse surrounding gendered consumption and female-oriented lifestyle practices. In this section, I trace NBC Universal’s acquisition of Oxygen and the media conglomerate’s formation of Women@NBCU. These two developments bring to light the specific role female affluencers play at Bravo. Moreover, the formation of Women@NBCU highlights how the synergistic approach to commodification deployed at NBC Universal relies on cybernetic commodification to connect an array of practices that allow NBC Universal to expand the exchange value of its female audience commodity. In fact, this new

initiative illustrates the foundational role advanced measurement and monitoring practices – which are used to create a mass customized gendered audience commodity for NBC Universal’s advertising clients – play in the viability of a multiplatform initiative that spans NBC Universal’s female-oriented properties and content. Finally, it allows us to reflect on the political economic and cultural implications of cybernetic commodification.

By 2007, when NBC purchased Oxygen, Bravo was a well-established female cable network, which generated a yearly cash flow in excess of \$150 million, and the plan was for Bravo to serve as a guidepost for NBC Universal’s trajectory with Oxygen (Carter, 2007). Oxygen was a profitable network that had experienced significant growth. Still, Geraldine Laybourne (CEO/founder) and Lisa Gersh (COO/president) argued that NBC Universal would “grow Oxygen into a behemoth” in a memo they sent to Oxygen staff (Gough and Szalai, 2007, para. 18). From Laybourne’s perspective Oxygen needed one thing at this point in time: exposure. Laybourne notes, “What is apparent now is that we need cross promotion, and that is really the biggest issue for Oxygen” (Gough and Szalai, 2007, para. 11). Given the success NBC Universal had in reverse repurposing *Queer Eye* and turning Bravo into a merchandising and franchising powerhouse, the presumption was that the media conglomerate could do the same thing for Oxygen.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> In particular, there was an indication *The Today Show* might be used to promote Oxygen programming, and there was talk about Oxygen replaying segments from *The Today Show* (Gough and Szalai, 2007, para. 13).

Moreover, Oxygen was a valuable asset that could be added to NBC Universal's gendered entertainment portfolio. In fact, *The Washington Post* noted:

Seen in 74 million homes, the seven-year-old Oxygen generally aims its programming at 18- to 34-year-old women. NBC Universal plans to add Oxygen to its suite of female-oriented programming to sell to advertisers, an attempt to capture and keep female viewers from cradle to grave. (Ahrens, 2007, p. 1)

The attention to capturing and keeping female viewers throughout their lifespan is disturbing. It is especially so given that the historical relations among television, women, and consumer culture have reinforced the social construction of heteronormative femininity by foregrounding the role consumer practices and lifestyle interests should play in the lives of women.

Following NBC Universal's acquisition of Oxygen, Zalaznick's responsibilities were broadened. Oxygen was now part of her female-focused portfolio, which also included Bravo and iVillage. It is clear that NBC Universal executives viewed Bravo and Oxygen as programming venues that could be used to generate revenue via gendered consumption. For example, Zalaznick profiled the female affluencers at Bravo and Oxygen to define key behavioral/spending habits. The result was that Oxygen's female affluencers were referred to as spenders, trenders, and recommenders, whereas Bravo's female affluencers were defined as big-spending, tech-savvy consumers (Hampp, 2008b). NBC Universal president Jeff Zucker was also attentive to the gendered nature of the audience commodity at these two cable networks. In fact, Zucker compared the acquisition of Oxygen to Bravo because they both were niche cable networks for women. Zucker went on to note that NBC Universal planned "aggressive cross-promotion for all of its



women's brands" (Carter, 2007, p. 9). Zucker was clear about the media conglomerate's goal: "We want to create a virtual women's network where we go to the market selling young women and affluent women in a way that virtually no one else can" (Ahrens, 2007, p. 1).

The first step in that direction was Zalaznick's promotion. Her new title – NBC Universal Women's Lifestyle Networks President – came with a mission: provide advertisers with targeted access to female consumers (Hampp, 2008b). Shortly after her promotion, Zalaznick likened her new executive position to being a shopping mall landlord. As the landlord of three anchor stores – Bravo, iVillage, and Oxygen – Zalaznick sought to provide a one-stop shopping opportunity for clients interested in the mass targeting of female consumers between 18 and 54 (Ahrens, 2007; Hampp, 2008b). Zalaznick's attention to malls and shopping is an apt metaphor that highlights the role the entertainment properties she manages play as a conduit for American consumerism. Of course, Zalaznick is interested in a gendered consumer, and the social construction of gender articulates with malls and shopping for women in a different way than with men. From the consumption of domestic goods for the home/family and consumption of products tied to women's personal appearance, to the feminization of public shopping space and women's role as workers and consumers in department stores, and beyond, various scholars have engaged the gendered nature of consumer culture (Porter-Benson, 1986; Peiss, 1998; Satterthwaite, 2001; and Cohen 2003).

When the Women@NBCU initiative was officially announced in 2008, Bravo was situated as the staple media brand. In contrast, the two other media entities

that were used to form Women@NBCU – Oxygen and iVillage – were positioned as struggling and languishing (Dominus, 2008). Lauren Zalaznick was responsible for maximizing advertising synergy across all of the female-oriented properties and content that spanned Women@NBCU. According to Zalaznick the initiative offered “an unparalleled ability to reach a customized psychographic female target everywhere they are, at every hour of the day, every day” (“NBC Universal Launches Women@NBCU” 2008, para. 3). For example, if an advertiser wanted to target an upscale and urban working woman who was a young trendsetter, Women@NBCU was able to use psychographic, demographic, and lifestyle data to map out the various points needed to generate a multiplatform plan than spanned an array of content that allowed the advertiser “to connect to that woman in scale” (Crupi, 2008, para. 9).

Kodak was one of the first clients to capitalize on the array of assets that formed Women@NBCU. The targeted audience, according Kodak’s brand marketing and communication VP, was feisty, frugal women who were “ultra high burners” and who served as the memory-keepers for their families (McClellan, 2009). The Kodak campaign was grounded in branded entertainment across iVillage, Oxygen, and Bravo. A combination of television spots, print, and online advertisements were used to drive female viewers across multiple platforms. For example, a BravoTV.com segment entitled Makeover-Matic allowed users to change hair color and test make-up, and to print out the makeover results (McClellan, 2009). The Bravo advertising component also included things like: online messaging located near the Makeover-Matic application and customized

vignettes in Bravo's signature television content that highlighted Kodak products and attempted to drive viewers to the Makeover-Matic application (McClellan, 2009). Here we see how Women@NBCU pushed women online – via custom vignettes aired on the Bravo cable network – and then engaged female viewers with an interactive, Web based activity that enabled them to fine-tune their personal look and print out the results. The campaign, which was launched in April 2009 and ran until the end of the year, increased brand awareness, product sales, and Web traffic for Kodak. According to brand marketing and communication VP Leslie Dance, the results were better than the high expectations Kodak had when the company initiated the sponsorship arrangement with Women@NBCU (McClellan, 2009).

The attention to marketing and packaging a gendered audience commodity is of course unsurprising in a cultural, political economic, and technological climate driven by nouveau riche consumer citizenship. Moreover, convergence, branding, and commodification are not new practices. Still, the legitimacy afforded to and the amplification of these discursive and material entities over time has supported the formation of various types of integrated spectacles. Affluent lifestyle entertainment is not the only type of integrated spectacle. Still, this gendered content relies on legacy of patriarchy and capitalism that is deeply interwoven in the discursive and material realities that characterize American society.

Bravo's rise as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network was essential to the formation of Women@NBCU. The gendered nature of the media entities, consumer practices, and lifestyle interests under discussion in this example

illustrate how capitalism and patriarchy continue to constrain the parameters of female subjectivity. Unfortunately, industry discourse that relies on a male/female division of labor is not uncommon. For example, Emily West's (2009) research illustrates how American Greetings and Hallmark – two companies “who together control about 85 percent of the greeting card industry in the US” – exploit gender difference in the marketing and advertising of greeting cards (p. 293). Overall, the formidable historical linkages embedded in the iteration of consumption and femininity in contemporary American culture has tended to disguise the socially constructed nature of the relations between these realms, allowing women's everyday lives to be marked by consumer practices and lifestyle interests (Felski, 2000; West, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Historically, the tensions amongst television, women, and consumer culture have reinforced the social construction of heteronormative femininity by foregrounding the role consumer practices and lifestyle interests should play in the lives of women. In fact, a primary concern according to television historians Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (1992) is “the way television tries to appeal to women consumers and the way it inserts itself into their everyday lives, both at home and in the market-place” (p. vii). Today, advanced monitoring and surveillance techniques have supported new ways to package, market, and sell the audience commodity. Cybernetic commodification is a concern throughout the digital media landscape. The immense success of niche cable channels and subsequent technological developments linked with the cable industry (e.g. the

role cable providers play in providing high speed Internet) have worked together to orient the digital media landscape writ large toward multiple technological platforms driven by niche interests and mass customization. Still, Bravo's rise as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network driven by postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship and the gendered/classed nature of *Women@NBCU* are two specific examples that illustrate how measurement, monitoring, and surveillance are used to package, market, and sell a gendered audience commodity.

Affluent lifestyle entertainment is an increasingly prevalent trend in the digital media landscape. This gendered content shapes, reinforces, and is shaped by the values of capitalist patriarchy. First, this content presents sexed subjectivity as a viable route to gender equality. While self-pleasing, hyper-sexuality, and affluent lifestyle may be a better option than selflessness, domesticity, and family lifestyle, both of these alternatives are oppressive entities that presume the inherent value of a public/private binary and heteronormative relations. Second, affluent lifestyle entertainment's cultural and political economic value comes from the ironic take on capitalist patriarchy interwoven through this content. As we have seen, ostentatious branded entertainment is one way irony is used as an aesthetic commodity to literally and figuratively sell conspicuous lifestyle to gendered viewers. Ostentatious branded entertainment effectively taps into the cultural ambivalence surrounding capitalist patriarchy, and thereby provides space for subversion and complicity. Finally, this gendered content supports capitalist patriarchy via an overdetermined climate grounded in brand management, cybernetic commodification and digital convergence. More

specifically, food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture give life to an integrated spectacle (Debord, 1988) that enters the flow and rhythm of a viewer's day-to-day life across various texts, platforms, and industries. In the next chapter, we take a look at *Project Runway*, a signature series that played a pivotal role in Bravo's solidification as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network.

## CHAPTER 6

### A CASE ANALYSIS OF *PROJECT RUNWAY*: FROM A LACKLUSTER PREMIER TO POP CULTURE FAME

In late 2003 Bravo unveiled four new shows for the upcoming year, and amongst these shows was *Project Runway* (*PR*). *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (*QESG*) was still going strong when *PR* premiered. There was even an attempt to spin off the makeover show with a female set of hosts (Romano, 2004). *PR* has a much weaker premier episode than *QESG*. As previously mentioned, *QESG* pulled in approximately 1.6 million viewers the first night it aired. In contrast, when *PR* premiered in December 2004 it had 354,000 viewers (De Moraes, 2004). Despite the weak start, reality programming grounded in food, fashion, design, pop culture, and beauty was Bravo president Lauren Zalaznick's new vision for Bravo, and her marketing, public relations, programming, and scheduling teams were emphatic about turning *PR* around (Ouellette, 2006). *PR* was no longer a lackluster show when the series wrapped in February 2005. In fact, the finale pulled in over 2 million viewers (Staff, 2005). By 2006, *PR* was dubbed Bravo's new hit show (Martin, 2006), and a year later in July 2007 *QESG*'s final season was announced. After four years on the air the makeover series ended with a 10 episode final season (Berman, 2007).

As the second signature reality program aired on Bravo, *PR* offers valuable insights into the evolution of Bravo's brand identity in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This chapter takes a feminist approach to industry studies to examine the show that marks Bravo's turn to a female audience. My case analysis

of *PR* relies on a vast array of paratexts <sup>112</sup> to situate *PR* as a form of affluent lifestyle entertainment. My case analysis illustrates how the texts, platforms, mediums, and industries involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of *PR* support the iteration of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship. Before delving into the case study of *PR*, I highlight three important themes – visual aesthetics and irony in a neoliberal context; licensing and merchandising; and advertising and technological convergence – that can be used to assess the convergences and divergences between *QESG* and *PR*. These themes are also representative of broader shifts taking place as affluent lifestyle entertainment takes hold in the digital media landscape.

Fast moving visual aesthetics, ironic content, and outrageous characters played an important role in *QESG*'s success. Visually compelling and high-speed montages were used to situate contestants at the beginning of each episode and to give visibility to the challenge the hosts faced. *QESG*'s high production value – compelling, fast, and flashy visual imagery – was paired with edgy ironic humor. Each week a new hapless and humiliated heterosexual male encountered the verbal and visual wrecking ball approach taken by the Fab Five (Stanley, 2003; Cohan, 2007). The militant fervor the hosts used to ransack each contestant's home, along with the intense and humorous verbal ridicule (Cohan, 2007), offered viewers verbal and visual delight. The Fab Five's lifestyle expertise, style, and authority as experts came from their gay identities, and they facilitated class mobility and heterosexual bliss via the personal transformation of *QESG*

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<sup>112</sup> Including, but not limited to: , print/online press coverage, promotional materials, and industry documents/government documents.



contestants. Of course, this occurred within a neoliberal political economic and cultural context driven by individual responsibility and self-transformation (Sender, 2006).

The *QESG* hosts relied on a very specific type of makeover candidate to generate their signature ironic inflection, accordingly casting was an important factor in the show's success. Director Danielle Eifler spent up to a month and a half casting each episode, and each day her two assistants combed through hundreds of website write-ins from potential contestants and/or their concerned friends in an effort to locate the perfect contestant for the quirky and confrontational hosts (Seibel, 2004). The Fab Five were experts with ability to train heterosexual males in lifestyle etiquette within a cultural context characterized by shifts in heterosexual gender roles that had altered societal expectations of masculinity. Gay identity was not pathological in this setting. Quite the contrary, the *QESG* cast had valuable expertise. They taught heterosexual males how to adequately consume, and thereby reshaped contestant's labor opportunities and salvaged their romantic relationship (Sender, 2006).

This process occurred through edgy behavior and ironic laughs that generated the show's camp sensibilities. The incongruity in sex role presentation between the clueless heterosexual male contestant and the Fab Five in each episode was integral to the ironic approach that characterized *QESG* (Cohan, 2007). *QESG* relied on inept heterosexual male contestants who were antithetical to the panache of the Fab Five. The stark contrast conveyed the challenging undertaking of transforming a lifestyle challenged straight man. Fashion stylist

Carson Kressely aptly capitalized on the incongruity. Kressely, a host known for his theatrical edge, was situated as a court jester due to his willingness to go to extremes to get a laugh (Givhan, 2003).<sup>113</sup> His hyperbolic fashion savant persona and camp sensibilities supported an over-the-top representation that had the potential to generate ironic laughter.

Of course, using irony to pander to problematic societal stereotypes surrounding identity has risks. Dave Chappelle sought to critique racial stereotypes and broaden “the discussion of race beyond the black and white dichotomy” with his satirical comedy (Acham, 2007, p. 327). Chappelle’s goals are admirable, as was his response when he felt he was not meeting these goals. Chappelle reportedly left a \$50 million dollar contract at Comedy Central due to his discomfort with on set laughter during the recording of a skit in the beginning of season four of *Chappelle Show*.<sup>114</sup> Scholar Christine Acham notes:

What this experience reinforced for Chappell is that in televised comedy, there are differences within the audience that have broader ramifications. What might be understood within one community as having one particular meaning may take on a different meaning in a different environment. (Acham, 2007, p. 334)

As is evident in the quote above, irony is a complex discursive strategy that comes with risks. Context and life experience influence if and how and ironic meaning is

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<sup>113</sup> For example, in the first season Carson went through contestant Brain Schepel’s “dirty, crumbled T-shirts with salad tongs” (Stanley, 2003, p. 3). This theatrical tactic was used to emphasize the unsuitable nature of the contestant’s clothing. Similarly, Carson relied on verbal humor – “I used to have hair just like your. Only my name was Louise and I lived in Switzerland” – to critique Schepel’s scrawny blond ponytail (Stanley, 2003, p. 3).

<sup>114</sup> According to a scholarly article on *Chappelle Show*, Dave Chappelle became uncomfortable with onset laughter during the filming of skit in which a small black pixie on Chappelle’s shoulder attempts to influence his in-flight meal selection of chicken or fish. Specifically, the laughter of a white person on the set did not just make Chappelle uncomfortable it also made him feel like he should “fire this person” (Acham 2007, 334).

interpreted. Even in the best circumstances (the “ironic meaning” is interpreted as it was encoded), the “literal meaning” still has power (Hutcheon, 1994). That means Carson Kressely’s over the top gay persona is a space of subversion and complicity.

Here we see the tensions between identity and irony that typify Bravo’s original programs. Starting with *QESG*, Bravo has used over the top representations of sexual orientation, class, gender, ethnicity, and race as an aesthetic commodity.<sup>115</sup> These extreme representations capitalize on irony’s evaluative edge. Irony is never a simple semantic inversion. Instead, ironic interpretation requires oscillation between the literal and the implied (Hutcheon, 1994). The ironic commodification of gay lifestyle in *Queer Eye* gave visibility to sexual identity in a homogenized way that aligned with the goals of nouveau riche consumer citizenship.

From the endless array of product placements found in the series, to the new opportunities afforded to the Fab Five (e.g. writing self-help books and starring in commercials), the makeover reality show was a pop-culture phenomenon with significant licensing and merchandising potential. Licensing and merchandising served an important role for reality television in the 2000s. First, these practices addressed the genres short staying power and limited earning potential (e.g. reality television was not conducive to syndication). Second, the

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<sup>115</sup> Bravo’s signature content uses irony as an aesthetic commodity in a variety of ways. For example, as we saw in the last chapter, ironic representations of branded entertainment and conspicuous lifestyle are used as aesthetic commodities in the signature programming that follows *QESG*.

reality genre was known for its ability to get contestants into licensed apparel and sell that apparel seamlessly via screen time (Edenkamp, 2004). *QESG* had a variety of characteristics –memorable characters, a transformational motif grounded in home and life improvement, and strong resonance in popular culture – seen as integral to the development of a licensing program. Still, journalist commentary suggests Bravo did not aptly exploit licensing and merchandising surrounding the series. In 2004, *Brandweek* journalist Becky Ebenkamp situated *QESG*'s limited attention to licensing and merchandising as a major deficit. The reason, of course, is because these practices offered the potential to enhance engagement and extend the viewing experience. Unlike *QESG*, *PR* was known for its multiplatform success with licensing and merchandising.

Finally as an original reality series known for its stellar cable ratings and commercial success, *QESG* clearly benefited from and capitalized on new strategies to garner advertising revenue. *QESG*'s success with product placement was of the utmost importance, especially considering the new marriage of commerce and content in the digital media landscape (Feuer, 2004). Yet advanced advertising strategies played a less central role for *QESG*, as opposed to *PR*. One reason for this may have been technological limitations in the measurement of product placement. For example, product placement measurement services were uncommon when *Queer Eye* premiered in summer 2004. At this point in time, product placement data came from the firms arranging the deals. The data included the program the product was placed in and how the product was utilized

in the program, no information was provided regarding if the product placement generated viewer interest (Feuer, 2004).

Given that Intermedia Advertising Group and Nielsen debuted product placement measurement services in the mid-2000s and *QESG* aired its series finale in summer 2007, there was limited time to incorporate this new measurement service (Feuer, 2004). In contrast, *PR* premiered at a point in time when product placement was gaining substantial traction in industry discourse (Lotz, 2007a) and, as we will see, the fashion competition: capitalized on industry sanctioned product placement measurement services; relied on branded entertainment, a more precise advertising strategy that moved beyond paid placements that merely show and/or mention a commodity; and engaged viewers across multiple technological platforms.

As we will see, *PR* capitalized on and moved beyond *QESG*. Attention to visual aesthetics and ironic content in a neoliberal context started with *QESG*. *PR* continued with over the top representation of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in a reality competition guided by popular culture, beauty, and fashion. In contrast, *PR* vastly exceeded *QESG* in the realms of licensing and merchandising. The last theme – advertising and technological convergence – takes on a new form that warrants different terminology. In fact, *QESG* purportedly relied on “tasteful” product placement, whereas *PR* is known for ostentatious branded entertainment that spans multiple technological platforms. While these are not the only three themes discussed, they are important because they illustrate how *PR* was similar to and different from *QESG*.

Bravo's attention to a sexed/gendered audience commodity interested in consumer practices and lifestyle interests started with *QESG*. Still, the hype surrounding *QESG* across trade journals and newspapers did not offer many articles touting the spending power of this new queer niche, or the overall spending power of Bravo's audience.<sup>116</sup> This is important considering that a plethora of newspaper and trade journal articles in the second half of the decade attended to Bravo's affluent female viewers and NBC Universal's ownership of influential, wealthy, and educated females via properties like Bravo, Oxygen, and iVillage.

An analysis of *PR* illustrates the role this reality show played in Bravo's popular culture recognition as an affluent lifestyle entertainment network. Like *QESG*, *PR* capitalized on interlocking cultural hierarchies amongst gender, sexuality, race, and class via the ironic personas of the hosts. In the three subsections that follow, I situate *PR* as a form of affluent lifestyle entertainment and examine the contributions *PR* has made to the iteration of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship in the digital media landscape. To do so, I move forward aware of and grounded in a contemporary feminist theoretical framework that "insists upon seeing gender as inextricably tied to race, class, and sexual orientation" (Vavrus, 2002 p. 13).

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<sup>116</sup> This is not to say there was no coverage, just much less. For example, a 2004 Broadcasting & Cable article highlighted the spending power of gay market broadly and Queer Eye specifically. The trade publication noted the high level of advertising spending for Queer Eye – \$36 million in combined advertising revenue for Queer Eye's airing on Bravo (\$22.6 million) and the NBC broadcast network (\$13.2 million) between September 2003 and February 2004 – and touted the enormous spending power of the gay demographic (McClellan, 2004).

### **Finding The Next *Sex and the City***

The final season of *Sex and the City* (*SATC*) (1998-2004) and the premier of *PR* on Bravo (2004 -2008) both aired in 2004. Dubbed the Christian Dior of unscripted television, Bravo took the desirable lifestyles and vicarious consumption that characterized *SATC* (Akass & McCabe, 2004) to new heights with its haute couture fashion competition. In fact, *PR* purportedly revamped the formulaic nature of talent competitions with its edgy content and attention to the alluring world of fashion (Stanley, 2007a). Stylish hosts – Supermodel Heidi Klum and Parson School of Design Chair Tim Gunn – guided the competition for the five seasons the show ran on Bravo. Here, I examine three ways *PR* has capitalized on and moved beyond *SATC*. My attention to ironic branded entertainment, paratextual buzz, and viewer interactivity illustrates the impact these two forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment have had (and continue to have) on gendered entertainment content in the digital media landscape.

HBO's well-known dramatic comedy *SATC* can be seen as the beginning of a trend toward affluent lifestyle entertainment. As noted in previous chapters, affluent lifestyle entertainment is not genre specific, nor is it a phenomenon just found in programming produced for television. Instead, affluent lifestyle entertainment can be seen across mediums and genres. This content immerses viewers in the process of commodity acquisition via its reliance on branded entertainment. The successful form of branded entertainment that characterized the hit HBO series generated a new standard for product placement, as brands that were incorporated into the show's plot line frequently "touched off runs on Oscar

de la Renta cocktail dresses, Fendi handbags and countless other fashion trophies” (Lipton, 2004, p. 1). In 2004, *SATC*’s reign as an illustrious branded entertainment venue that sold lifestyle interests and consumer practices across an array of texts, platforms, and industries was coming to an end. This purportedly led marketing executives and fashion publicists to search through the television line-up for “candidates to become the next hot fashion showcase” (Lipton, 2004, p. 1).

Amongst the shows on the watch list: *Will & Grace*, *Desperate Housewives*, *The O.C.*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Girl*, and *Project Runway*.

*PR* premiered in December 2004. In September 2004, three months before *PR* aired on Bravo, *The Wall Street Journal* noted how producers and sponsors intended to utilize the reality show as a vehicle to showcase the fashion world. In particular, the last third of the article “After ‘Sex,’ fashion world looks for a new TV showcase” attended to the promotional extravaganza planned for *PR*. As noted in *The Wall Street Journal*:

Banana Republic bought airtime and will play a major role in the show. Details haven’t been finalized, but regular branded features are under consideration, such as Banana Republic style tips. Deborah Lloyd, executive vice president of design for the chain, will preside over a “design challenge,” in which contestants will whip up an item that might be sold at Banana Republic stores. Contestants can make trips to the “accessories bar” to pick out handbags and shoes. At the end of the series, the winning designer gets a runway show during New York’s Fashion Week in February 2005, a fashion spread in *Elle* magazine, plus six months of mentoring from Banana Republic. Neither Banana Republic nor Bravo would disclose financial details. (Lipton, 2004, p. 1)

It is clear from the above excerpt that Bravo incorporated multiple public relations opportunities for the fashion industry. From a design challenge and corporate mentoring with Banana Republic, to an *Elle* magazine spread and NY Fashion



Week, there were many routes to generate paratextual buzz when *PR* was launched (Lipton, 2004). Moreover, the article in *The Wall Street Journal* framed *PR* as an important promotional venue for the fashion industry prior to its release. In this instance, paratextual buzz preceding the show's premier created meaning and value by announcing the well-integrated approach to branded entertainment and situating the show as a potential successor for *SATC* (Gray, 2010). Assuming Bravo wanted *PR* to become the next *SATC* – this is more than likely since *Runway* was pitched as the ultimate conceptualization of synergistic fashion (Lipton, 2004) – branded entertainment, paratextual buzz, and multiplatform convergence were of the utmost importance.

*SATC* was known for linking commodities with iconic celebrities, generating write-ups in popular culture/fashion magazines, and sparking coverage radio, television and/or Internet coverage. For example, a Calvin Klein representative noted how *SATC* raised the bar on fashion promotion by getting viewers really interested in and addicted to the show's four leading ladies. Similarly, costume designer Patricia Field highlighted how early on things clicked for *SATC*. According to Field's "once we saw the direction it was going in, we played the clicks for all they were worth" (Lipton, 2004, p. 1). Field's quote in the *Wall Street Journal* is indicative of the role multiplatform convergence and cybernetic commodification played in *SATC*'s success. Things "clicking" can be seen as a reference to how the show sold lifestyle interests and consumer practices primed for emulation to female viewers (Arthurs, 2003). In fact, Field's attention to how clicks were played

“for all they were worth” literally speaks to how paratextual buzz was generated by, and subsequently feed into *SATC*’s iconic status in popular culture.

Things clicked for *PR* following the show’s December 2004 premier. Trade journal coverage highlighting *PR*’s effective approach to branded entertainment suggested the fashion competition was following in the footsteps of *SATC*. For example, in April 2005 *Advertising Age* identified *PR* as the show with the most successful brand integration at NBC Universal:

The network’s youngest series with a median age of 34.4, integrated such major marketers as Cotton Inc., Banana Republic, L’Oreal and Drexel Heritage furniture. Banana Republic and Cotton Inc. were both integrated into story lines, creating buzz among women both in their 20s and 30s and the fashion design community. (“Road to upfront,” 2005, p. 4)

The above excerpt highlighted the buzz that Bravo’s unabashed efforts with product integration generated amongst the fashion industry and female viewers. At this point in time *PR*, like its predecessor *SATC*, was effectively promoting and selling lifestyle interests and consumer practices via branded entertainment primed for emulation. Moreover, paratextual discourse announced and substantiated *PR*’s value as a public relations vehicle for the fashion industry. Like its predecessor *SATC*, *PR* generated buzz across various texts, platforms, and industries through a brand identity that enhanced viewer interest in and knowledge of the show, and channeled the consumer lifestyle of female viewers.

In addition to product integration, innovative e-commerce efforts and customized content were two other ways *PR* appealed to lifestyle interests and generated consumer practices (Deeken, 2005). *PR*’s innovative e-commerce efforts capitalized on popular culture icons to sell commodities. In particular, Barbie

(season two, episode 3) and Sarah Jessica Parker (season four, episode two) guided two different *PR* fashion challenges. In the first instance, designers were asked to create an ensemble for My Scene Barbie. The winning designer (Nick Verreos) outfitted Barbie with his Copacabana look. Following the My Scene Barbie contestant challenge the Barbie website “sold out of the 3,300 dolls wearing the winning designer’s creation” (Klaassen, 2006, p. 3). In the second instance, Sarah Jessica Parker – the actress that played Carrie on *SATC* – served as a guest judge. The winning design, which came from contestant Victorya Hong, was sold as a part of the actress’s Bitten fashion line at Steve and Barry’s.<sup>117</sup>

Here we get insight into how *PR* invited viewers to enhance their relationship with the show’s brand identity through consumer practices in the digital media landscape. Following Bruzzi and Church Gibson’s (2006) argument about fashion in *SATC*, I attend to the spectacular status afforded to clothing and accessories in *PR*. While the aforementioned scholars do not reference Debord (1988), I believe the life given to commodities in *SATC* and *PR* illustrates how these two forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment function as integrated spectacles. The themes and commodities used to attract viewers worked together to generate a well-branded version of postfeminism nouveau riche consumer citizenship that aligned with naturalized linkages between femininity and consumption. Moreover, *PR*’s attention to branding, commodification, and convergence has left (and continues to leave) an indelible mark on the “fashion-media complex.”

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<sup>117</sup> According to *USA Today* the two-piece ensemble was sold separately. The dress (available in black and burgundy) was sold for \$19.98, while the vest (available in black and gray) was sold for \$14.98 (“Project Runway dress going on sale,” 2007).

Most people are familiar with the “sports-media complex.” The use of this term references the powerful institutional relations between sports and media. In contemporary American culture, the sports-media complex serves as a “symbiotic economic and representational system that continues to grow in strength and size” (Vavrus, 2007, p. 248). In “The Politics of NASCAR Dads: Branded Media Paternity,” Mary Douglas Vavrus (2007) attends to how this leisure practice governs its predominately male viewers. According to Vavrus, NASCAR offers an “escape from over regulation by the state and employers” via well branded entertainment that appropriates a form of masculinity grounded in White conservative Christianity, patriotism, and fatherhood (2007, p. 247). NASCAR dads have become an iconic masculine troupe that span a variety of licensing and merchandising ventures. This intensive effort at remasculinization is one example of how the sports-media complex has perpetuated old-world patriarchy in a post-9/11 cultural context (Vavrus, 2007).

Building on Vavrus (2007), I argue the fashion-media complex shapes and is shaped by contemporary culture. *Project Runway* fashionistas are a well-branded audience commodity. This socially constructed female trope exploits, supports, and perpetuates historical tensions amongst women, fashion, and consumption. During *PR*'s five seasons on Bravo, the show ubiquitously privileged fashion, lifestyle interests, consumer practices, and melodrama. *PR* fashionistas received access to a vast array of multiplatform branding initiatives. From an iTunes partnership and a deal with MySpace.com, to blogging and interactive voting, *PR* offered tech savvy fashionistas equally fluent in digital technology and haute

couture a way to consume commodities and melodrama across various platforms. Ringtones with Heidi Klum's parting catch phrase ("you're either in, or you're out"), streaming footage of contestant meltdowns, and online games were three specific ways Bravo appealed to the lifestyle interests of *PR*'s fervent and committed fans with customized content (Stanley, 2006). Of course, Bravo's convergence of entertainment and consumption across multiple interactive platforms supported advanced monitoring and surveillance techniques that gave the cable network access to a valuable cybernetic commodity (Meehan, 1984; Andrejevic, 2004; Mosco, 2010). Overall, technological interactivity was of the utmost importance for *PR* as it left a digital footprint of viewer activity, while it also enhanced the viewer's relationship with the show's brand identity.

Whether new viewers or avid fans *PR* relied on promotional materials that spanned multiple texts (e.g. shopping bags, magazine articles, and television appearances), platforms (e.g. broadcast TV/radio) and industries (e.g. fashion, beauty, and travel) during its five seasons on Bravo. These promotional materials served as early frames for viewers unfamiliar with the show and reinforced *PR*'s brand image as a premier site for female fashionistas. The effort to frame how viewers thought about and interacted with *PR* (Gray, 2010) can be seen across marketing efforts. Black Friday shopping bags, Tim Gunn's fashion reviews during NBC's Olympic coverage, United Airlines planes, and magazines like *Elle/US Weekly* were used to promote season two of *Runway*. The frame being generated oriented female viewers toward lifestyle interests and consumer practices via attention to fashion, shopping, travel, celebrity lifestyle, and popular culture.

Following in *SATC*'s footsteps, *PR* relied on synergistic relations amongst an array of texts, products, platforms, and industries to produce a textual frame that promoted affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption.

Newspaper and trade journal coverage of *PR*'s popular appeal helped frame the show as a text worthy of viewer and advertiser interest. In particular, season two and three of *PR* received attention for record-breaking ratings. At the end of season two *PR* was situated a "cable barn-burner" because the series averaged 1.7 million viewers for the season and 3.4 million viewers watched the finale. In this instance, attention was given to the record-breaking number of viewers the season two finale pulled in for Bravo, and the 102% improvement over season one in the desirable 18-34 demographic (Stanley, 2006, p. 8). By December 2006 trade journal and newspaper coverage situated *PR* as Bravo's popular culture successor to *QESG*. An excerpt from an article in *Broadcasting and Cable* speaks to *PR*'s valued status in popular culture. As noted by journalist Anne Becker (2006, p. 24):

Yes, it's true: *Runway*'s third season was a huge boon for Bravo, corralling an audience of 5.4 million for its finale and making it the network's most watched ever- and earning heaps of press coverage (consider us among the "guilty").

Becker (2006) highlights the record-breaking audience, as well as the large amount of press coverage generated for *PR*. The journalist went on to dub *Runway* as a network redefining show for Bravo. This type of celebratory coverage further substantiated *PR*'s cultural and political economic value.

The fashion industry clearly benefited from and supported *PR*'s political economic and cultural value, and *Runway*'s iconic status as a conduit for female consumption can be seen in the show's physical presence at New York Fashion

Week. Every season of *Runway* that aired on Bravo culminated in the final three contestants participating in a catwalk show at New York Fashion Week. *Project Runway's* catwalk shows were seen as an important event in the fashion industry. A 2006 excerpt from the *New York Times* noted how “a catwalk show by four “Project Runway” designers was such a hot ticket that more than one industry pro seemed miffed at having to miss the presentation because it clashed with the Ralph Lauren show” (Silva, p. 1). The journalist reporting on *PR* also added a quote from an editor at *Interview* magazine that questioned why Ralph Lauren would schedule a catwalk show at the same time as the *PR* catwalk show (Silva, 2006). Here we get insight into the value industry professionals afforded to *PR's* catwalk show. The response industry professionals had to choosing between the *Runway* designers and Ralph Lauren finds legitimacy in the synergistic relations between the fashion competition and New York fashion Week over the show's five season on Bravo. The symbiotic relations between these two industries highlight the power, growth, and expansion of the fashion-media complex.

Heretofore, I have reviewed the vast array of texts (e.g. news coverage and promotional materials), products (e.g. designer fashions and dolls), platforms (e.g. television, radio, and the Internet), and industries (e.g. fashion, beauty, and travel) that framed *PR* in the digital media landscape. Like *SATC*, *PR* promoted and sold conspicuous lifestyle through ostentatious branded entertainment that was primed for emulation. Still, I argue the production and consumption of fashion, image, and appearance took on new life in *PR*. On the one hand, the show manufactured and displayed fashion designers via the process of conspicuous

production. More specifically, each season this career-oriented reality show served as a gateway to fame and fortune in the fashion industry for a select few. On the other hand downloading *PR* content (e.g. screen savers and ring tones) and purchasing a commodity associated with the show served as forms of conspicuous consumption that connected viewers to the *PR* brand community.

Consumer and career lifestyle align well with the goals of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship. *PR* used these two market-based practices to strategically entice viewers to enhance their relationship with the show's brand identity across multiple platforms. As a multiplatform source of branded entertainment, *PR* pulled in an affluent female audience. For five seasons audience interest in *PR* content served as an effective route to gendered commodity consumption guided by personal look and lifestyle. Paratextual hype surrounding the fashion competition generated, fed off, and reinforced *PR*'s prominent role within the fashion-media complex. To complicate things more, *Project Runway* used irony as an aesthetic commodity to engage gendered viewers. Accordingly, in the next subsection we examine the role campy dramedy and identity politics played in *PR*.

### **Campy Dramedy and Identity Politics**

*SATC* and *PR* both exploit an over the top vision of consumer culture grounded in branded entertainment that appeals to a gendered audience interested in food, design, fashion, beauty, and popular culture. Following scholars like Angela McRobbie (2009) and Susan Douglas (2010), I do not embrace a cultural populist perspective that touts women's ability to subvert consumer



culture by making use of and/or celebrating consumption oriented texts in their own way. Instead, I argue affluent lifestyle entertainment is a gendered form of entertainment that is situated in an overdetermined cultural, political economic and technological context. As we have seen, *PR*'s effective approach to brand management is situated in a web of texts, platforms, mediums, and industries that rely on digital convergence to channel consumption of gendered commodities. Here, I examine *PR*'s use of irony as an aesthetic commodity. First, I briefly reflect on *PR*'s ironic approach to branded entertainment. Then, I examine how *PR* made use of camp sensibilities in its five seasons on the Bravo cable network. My main interest is how the irony in *PR* functions as an aesthetic commodity that supports the iteration of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship.

Bravo's reliance on branded entertainment that presumes and panders to the boredom viewers have with the artificial conventions of advertising was discussed in the previous chapter. *PR* was the first signature series at Bravo that was recognized in periodical coverage for this ironic take on branded entertainment. This of course does not mean that *QESG* did not capitalize on product integration. Instead, during *QESG*'s reign Bravo's product integration was characterized as "tasteful." In contrast, *PR* blatantly announced its product integrations. This ostentatious approach to branded entertainment purportedly allowed viewers to enjoy their awareness of behind the scenes processes, and to feel savvy and superior. In the five seasons *PR* aired on Bravo challenges included activities like: finding inspiration for a fashion design in a Hershey Store, capturing the essence of Levi jeans, and make use of the Banana Republic accessories bar

(Lipton, 2004; Dominus, 2008). Similarly, host activities allowed for product integration deemed so obvious that it came across as retro chic. Most notably, Tim Gunn's ritualistic attention to the Bluefly Accessories Wall purportedly offered a regularity and reverence that placed viewers inside the industry process of product integration (Dominus, 2008). Here again, as in chapter five, the rejection/substitution theory of irony is being used to highlight "ironic meaning." This makes sense given the role authenticity plays in postmodern consumer culture. Still, it is not the whole story. In reality, Gunn's ritualistic attention to the Bluefly Accessories Wall is an ambivalent space that simultaneously offers viewers subversion and complicity. Of course, advertisers interested in selling gendered commodities greatly benefitted from this ambivalence.

Camp sensibilities are another way *PR* used irony as an aesthetic commodity during its five seasons on the Bravo cable network. In fact, "campy dramedy" is a term that arose in newspaper and trade journal coverage of *PR*. Camp is a cultural style that can occur inside and outside gay/transgender subcultures (Halberstam, 2005), and dramedy speaks to melodramatic content grounded in exaggeration. Campy dramedy emphasizes over the top themes, situations, and characters that capitalize on humor and theatricality. In this section, I examine how the characteristics of the hosts, the structure of the show, and the personas of the contestants generated *PR*'s campy dramedy, and consider the implications this has for the iteration of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship.

During the five seasons *PR* aired on Bravo, the labor-intensive reality competition offered gendered and sexed viewers a way to consume design, beauty, fashion, and popular culture that aligned with assumptions surrounding the dominant social construction of femininity and homosexuality. Heidi Klum and Tim Gunn, *PR*'s two hosts, embodied the type of gendered and sexed personas one would expect to find in campy dramedy. First, supermodel host Heidi Klum exuded the attention to feminine beauty standards and heteronormative sexuality found in *SATC* (Arthurs, 2003). Klum's status as a sexual commodity – embedded in two industries (fashion and media) that place the utmost value in youthful, white, and affluent heterosexual femininity – was privileged on *PR*. Klum's on screen persona was grounded in her sexual allure and status as a supermodel, and short dresses and sexual posturing became iconic markers of Klum's performance on *PR*. Klum's co-host, Tim Gunn, offered the style and panache of the Fab Five. Like the hosts for *QESG*, Gunn is an openly gay man. Still, the dapper gray-haired host is much more conservative than the Fab five. Gunn's classic sophistication was a trademark for the show during the five seasons it aired on Bravo. Gunn was known for his expensive suits and his trademark pinstripes (Wilson, 2007). Nonetheless, his *PR* persona was about more than his style. Gunn served as the tough but empathetic caretaker, mentor, and den mother on *PR* (Bianculli, 2006a; Silva, 2006; Farmer, 2008; Fink, 2007). Gunn's absence from contestant judging supported his persona by positioning the co-host as the caring and perfect fairy Godfather (Faber & Huguemin, 2007). In contrast, Klum purportedly showed faux concern for competitors, and was seen as bitchy (Edwards, 2006) and harsh (Breitman, 2006).

Klum's role in contest judging and her iconic status as the individual that announced eliminated contestants fit well with her persona as a smiling assassin (Edwards, 2006) and a lifeless uncaring co-host (Silva, 2006). Indeed, Klum was known for her ubiquitous kiss-off line "you're either in, or you're out," which she purportedly delivered with a harsh German bark (Faber & Huguenin, 2007).

The campy dramedy embodied by Klum and Gunn was parodied by the sketch comedy show *Mad TV* on November 2, 2006 (Episode # 1204). As would be expected there was a stark contrast between the two hosts in the realms of fashion attire, physical performance, vocal performance, and demeanor. First, three different tight fitting and extremely short dresses were used as fashion attire for the actress satirizing Klum. Alternatively, the actor playing Gunn only wore one ensemble in the short skit, a conservative grey suit with a white shirt. Second, the actress playing Klum relied on runway posing and provocative sexual posturing to draw attention. In particular, pronounced and exaggerated movements from the arms and legs were used to strut the runway and pose with attitude. Noticeable full body shots and medium shots of legs and cleavage were used to highlight the pronounced sexual posturing. In contrast, the actor that played Gunn had an understated physical presence characterized by small and precise movements. The camera primarily focused on medium shots and/or close-ups that allowed viewers access to minute facial expressions. Turning to vocal attributes and demeanor, the actress satirizing Klum's performance on *PR* combined high volume and high pitch with a pronounced accent and a demeaning tone. Klum's persona was completed with a stoic demeanor characterized by a flat affect that evidenced no concern for

contestants as they were axed from the show. The actor playing Gunn relied on soft and unassuming vocal attributes commonly associated with an authoritative parent. Gunn's persona was completed by a caring demeanor characterized by an obsessive attention to the time designers had left to complete their task. Overall, the Mad TV parody capitalized on Klum's status as a bitchy, aloof, heterosexual supermodel sex symbol and Gunn's persona as the fastidious gay man that took care of the contestants.

Ultimately, *PR*'s spectacle was part of its appeal. From the host's personas and trademark phrases, to cutthroat competition, hypersensitive egos, and outlandish creativity, *PR* was a space of excess. As noted in *The New York Times*:

At the heart of the show's appeal is the campy dramedy that ensues when already brittle personalities, possessed of the ego and drive that drew them to the fashion world in the first place, are thrown together on a deadline. Viewers are transfixed not only by watching contestants cut up their favorite outfits to make a dress, but also by watching them fashion their personas. (Silva 2006, p. 1)

The above excerpt highlights the role two additional elements – the show's structure and the contestant's personas – played in this well-packaged form of commodified irony.

In relation to the show's structure, three important features consistently present were: contestant challenges, celebrity judges, and casting. These factors set the stage for the theatrics and humor that ensued. Eccentric and timed design challenges were key to *PR*'s campy dramedy. Factors like unusual settings and short time-frames were used to amp up the tension amongst contestants seeking to attain their dream career. In the premier episode of season one, a grocery store served as the unexpected location for the first design challenge. Each contestant

had one hour and \$50 to acquire the necessary materials for their first fashion design, and then they had one day to create a glamorous evening outfit (Bianculli, 2004). Acquiring design materials from a grocery store was a theme that was used again (season 5, episode 1). Yet there were also other unexpected settings to start the design process, such as the New York Flower District (season 2, episode 9) and the Waste Management Recycle America Center in New Jersey (season 3, episode 6). Challenges also included designing for high stakes brands like: Banana Republic (season 1, episode 3 and season 2, episode), Olympic figure skater and 2006 silver medalist Sasha Cohen (season 2, episode 7), supermodel Iman (season 2, episode 11), and Macy's (season 3, episode 4).

Dramatic tension – driven by time limitations, unusual circumstances, and high stakes brands – was not the only theme in *PR*'s design challenges. Another prominent theme was female fashions designed for celebrity guest judges. Throughout the show's five seasons on Bravo fashions were rarely designed for men.<sup>118</sup> In particular, one design challenge linked *PR* with *Lipstick Jungle*.<sup>119</sup> The "Welcome to the Jungle" episode that aired in August 2008 (season five, episode 5) was grounded in a design challenge that highlights the synergist relations between *PR* and *Lipstick Jungle*, two forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment distributed by

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<sup>118</sup> The array of female fashions created include things like: wedding dresses (season 1, episode 5); swim suits (season 1, episode 6); a Red carpet dress for Nancy O'Dell (season 1, episode 9); a formal gown for Miss USA 2006 (season 2, episode 2); lingerie (season 2, episode 4); prom dresses for New Jersey high school students (season 4, episode 7); outfit for WWE Divas (season 4, episode 10); and an ensemble for a female television character (season 5, episode, 5).

<sup>119</sup> *Lipstick Jungle*, a female oriented dramatic comedy that resembled *SATC* aired on one of Bravo's sister networks at NBC Universal. The first season of *Lipstick Jungle* premiered on the NBC broadcast network in February 2008.

NBC Universal. Brooke Shields – the actress that played fictional character Wendy Healy in *Lipstick Jungle* – served as a guest judge for the “Welcome to the Jungle” episode of *PR*. Shields selected the winning ensemble, which her character Wendy Healy would wear in a future episode of *Lipstick Jungle*.<sup>120</sup>

Four of the six designs created for the “Welcome to the Jungle” challenge are shown below (figure 3). The picture came from an online article entitled “Project Runway User's Guide: Welcome to the Lipstick Jungle” (Grinspan, 2008). Grinspan (2008) noted how the “Welcome to the Jungle” episode doubled as an effort to promote *Lipstick Jungle* as a post *SATC* fashion venue. Moreover, two of the four ensembles in the image below were highlighted in “Project Runway: 25 Looks We Love” (Olroff, 2008), a fashion pictorial that allowed viewers to span through selections for the best *PR* looks of season five.

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<sup>120</sup> All twelve *PR* contestants sketched and pitched their designs to Shields. The contestants responsible for the six designs Shields approved were appointed team leaders and selected a cast team member to execute their ensemble.

**Figure 7: "Welcome to the Jungle" Designs**



*Lipstick Jungle* failed to attain *SATC*'s commercial success, and the show was cancelled after its second season.<sup>121</sup> Still, this design challenge illustrates the synergistic relations across two forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment distributed by NBC Universal. Additional links between *PR*, *Lipstick Jungle*, and *SATC* give visibility to the interconnected nature of brand identities in the digital television landscape. NBC's *Lipstick Jungle*, like HBO's *SATC*, was based on the work of best-selling author Candace Bushnell. As mentioned in the last section, Sarah Jessica Parker – the female lead for the HBO hit *SATC* – was a *PR* guest judge in season four. Brooke Shields and Sarah Jessica Parker are well known celebrities linked to their respective roles in *Lipstick Jungle* and *SATC*, two fictional television series highly attuned to fashion. Parker was a guest judge on *PR* in November

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<sup>121</sup> *Sex and the City* creator Darren Starr followed up his hit HBO show with the *Cashmere Mafia*. *Cashmere Mafia* (ABC) and *Lipstick Jungle* (NBC) were broadcast network take-offs on *Sex and the City*.



2007. At that point in time HBO no longer aired new episodes of the series, although the first *SATC* film was released in theaters in May 2008. In contrast, *Lipstick Jungle* was a fledgling show in August 2008 when Brooke Shields was a guest judge. Shield's appearance and the upcoming *PR* fashion design her character was slated to wear in season two of *Lipstick Jungle* were synergist promotional efforts used to generate paratextual buzz for both shows.

Brooke Shields and Sarah Jessica Parker were not the only two celebrity guest judges that linked *PR* to fictional forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment. Patricia Field – the fashion designer for *SATC* – was a guest judge on the premier episode of *PR* (Bianculli, 2004). Other celebrity guest judges include, but are not limited to: actress Debra Messing, designer Kate Spade, singer Victoria Beckham, and designer Betsy Johnson. In addition to celebrity guest judges, *PR* had two regular celebrity judges during the five seasons the show ran on Bravo. Designer Michael Kors and *Elle* Magazine Fashion Director Nina Garcia were known for their devastatingly witty criticism (Murphy, 2007). *The Daily News* positioned Kors and Garcia as obnoxious and fickle judges who were frequently condescending and petty (Faber & Huguenin, 2007). Overall, the parade of celebrity judges (e.g. athletes, designers, and actresses) added to the show's allure and increased the stakes for contestants who normally would not have access to people with this level of fame and power.

Finally, *PR* was known for contestants that generated drama, and that required casting characters that would clash on camera. During its five seasons on Bravo, *PR* was known for casting disparate personalities well suited for conflict

(Bianculli, 2004). Bravo capitalized on the antics of the casting process prior to the release of season three by giving viewers an inside look at the process. The season three casting preview that aired was, according to *New York Times* journalist David Bianculli, almost “as much fun as the early round of “American Idol”” (2006, p. 81). Of course, *American Idol's* early rounds are known for the outlandish and frequently humiliating efforts individuals without vocal abilities make to get on the singing competition.

The dynamics amongst contestant casting, dramatic tasks, and celebrity judges made for compelling television. *PR* has had remarkable success with, and mastered, a contestant formula that pushed “fashion designers until they split at their emotional seams” (Elving, 2007, p. 7). The formula – inappropriate comments, back-stabbing, whining, and the did he/she really say/do that moments – purportedly led viewers to tune-in and watch in horrid fascination as fashion designers competed to become the next Dana Buchman or Ralph Lauren (Elving, 2007). While *PR* had both male and female contestants the words used to describe the over the top contestants tended to align with a gendered and sexed vision of the fashion industry. Here I would like to highlight two contestant personas – (1) the drama queen and (2) the elusive diva – that spanned gender role.

Contestants represented as drama queens were portrayed as egotistical and emotionally unstable individuals. Tantrums, meltdowns, and manipulative behavior were common occurrences amongst drama queens. Drama queens were typically disliked and derided by contestants and viewers for their melodrama and emotional instability. Season one contestant Wendy Pepper fit the drama queen

trope via egomaniacal behavior and spasmodic emotional rants (Givhan, 2006). Viewers interviewed at Drexel's Fashion Design program expressed irritation with Pepper's complaining and sneaky behavior and criticized her fashion design ability following their viewing of episode seven (Wellington, 2005). In fact, when Pepper was not eliminated they argued she was "just on to help keep the show interesting" (Wellington, 2005, p. 1). Of course, a drama queen like Pepper is useful to have around as it sparks controversy amongst contestants and viewers. Unsurprisingly, Pepper, the character viewers loved to hate, was one of the final three contestants in season one, and when contestants were brought back to reminisce. In the reunion special before the New York Fashion Week finale, Pepper was there to spark conflict and generate buzz (Stanley, 2005). Ultimately Wendy Pepper was represented as an unhinged and backstabbing woman. Her drama queen persona sparked contestant and viewer controversy. In that vein, it is more than likely that her third place status was derived from some combination of campy dramedy and fashion design talent.

Season two brought another drama queen, male contestant Santino Rice. Rice was referred to by *Daily News* journalist Marisa Guthrie (2006a) as the "Omarosa of basic cable" (p. 41). Omaroseonee Manigault-Stallworth was cast as an emotionally volatile backstabbing woman of color in the first season of *The Apprentice*. Like Omarosa, Santino Rice was a cantankerous, racially marked character known for his role as a drama queen. Rice's vain efforts at manipulation are readily apparent in the response he had when the tight and plunging jumpsuit he made for fellow contestant Kara Janx ripped on the runway. Since the episode

was focused on a peer makeover, Rice claimed Janx was so elated with her transformation that “she tore it jumping for joy” (Silva, 2006, p. 1). As with season one drama queen Wendy Pepper, Rice made it to the final three, and was dubbed second runner up. Rice’s vanity – for example, he claimed, “whether you love to hate me or hate to love me, I’m not just good TV, I’m a great designer” – and his sharp tongue (e.g. he had the nerve to make fun of polite and unflappable co-host Tim Gunn) are two other characteristics the press used to illustrate his status as a drama queen (Guthrie, 2006a, p. 41). In this instance Rice was clearly aware that he got to the finale based on some combination of campy dramedy and designer talent.

The elusive diva was a more polished persona characterized by mystery/allure and unwavering commitment to competition. Season three winner Jeffery Sebelia was situated as an elusive diva, and newspaper coverage of *PR* indicated Sebelia selected this persona prior to his participation in the show. In fact, Sebelia shared details about how he crafted his inaccessible and evocative onscreen persona, noting that he had his girlfriend get him “a black hooded sweatshirt” and wore that with “sunglasses the first few episodes” to evoke a mysterious and dark feel (Peden, 2006, p. 4). Sebelia’s efforts seemed to be successful, as castmates and viewers purportedly perceived him as “abrasive, divalike and unrelentingly competitive” (Peden, 2006, p. 4).

Laura Bennett offered a polished and alluring female version of the elusive diva. One journalist called the season three contestant intoxicating, and argued she was a mix of Miranda Priestly (the fashion editor in *The Devil Wears Prada*, played

by Meryl Streep) and Bree Van De Kamp (one of the four female characters on *Desperate Housewives*) (Heller, 2006). These two fictional characters are known for their elusive demeanor, penchant for perfectionism and success, and their conspicuous consumption. Moreover, both Priestly (*The Devil Wears Prada*) and Van De Kamp (*Desperate Housewives*) are female leads in media content that I would characterize as affluent lifestyle entertainment. Like the fictional characters mentioned, Bennett was an elusive diva with an affinity for conspicuous consumption. For example, Bennett carried the materials for her lengthy and noticeable grooming regimen in a Louis Vuitton train case (Givhan, 2006).

The demise of a narcissistic drama queen or the triumph of the elusive diva played a pivotal role in *PR*'s popularity, as did the general minefield of tantrums and histrionics amongst cast members (Stanley, 2005). Many newspaper and trade journal articles noted the presence of bitchy behavior, catfights and cattiness,<sup>122</sup> as well as drama, breakdowns and eccentric personalities.<sup>123</sup> Indeed egotistical designers airing dirty laundry was fodder for viewers that loved catty conversation and fashion. The disintegration of a carefully constructed persona was part of *PR*'s appeal, and contestants broadly perceived as vulnerable or vain characters generated viewer interest in the winners for weekly competitions. On the one hand, vulnerable characters that relied on self-deprecating humor supported viewer identification with and invest in an underdog. In contrast, vain characters that relied on self-aggrandizing could elicit laughter due to their lack of self-

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<sup>122</sup> Including but not limited to, Edwards, 2006; Smith, 2005; and Puente, 2007.

<sup>123</sup> Including but not limited to, Dorazio, 2006; Guthrie, 2006a, 2006b; and Farber & Huguenin, 2007.

reflexivity. From specific personas like the drama queen and the elusive diva, to general tenor of eccentric personalities guided by vanity and vulnerability, *PR* capitalized on campy dramedy driven by stunning fashion and piles of delicious gossip, two themes that are stereotypically linked with women and gay men in mainstream culture (Peterson, 2007).

During its five seasons on Bravo, *PR* relied on camp sensibilities and melodramatic content grounded in exaggeration. Specific aspects (e.g. thematic structure, branded entertainment, and host/contestant personas) of *PR* could be experienced as demystifying and duplicitous. This show functioned via an evaluative edge that allowed for and encouraged oscillating interpretations of its excess (Hutcheon, 1994). Still, as with all irony, *PR* tapped into existing ideological and social norms that have discursive and materials consequences. The norms of capitalist patriarchy allowed for this ironic content to be “both perceived and permitted” (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 100). For example, the co-hosts offered a gendered way to consume design, beauty, and popular culture that aligned with presumptions about the fashion industry. Through the representations of these two co-hosts, and cultural commentary on these representations, Klum’s sexy, cold, and bitchy persona was set in contrast to Gunn’s role as the impeccable, conservative, and polite contestant caretaker. Following Susan Douglas’s (2010) commentary on gender in popular culture, Klum’s persona exemplifies how female sexuality is both exploited (e.g. ceaseless objectification of her visual aesthetics) and punished (e.g. her persona as a cold uncaring bitch).

For contestants, this career-based reality show was a gateway to celebrity status for a chosen few. Both male and female contestants needed to do what was necessary to accomplish their professional goals in the fashion industry. The anxiety surrounding the ability to succeed in the fashion industry was ramped up through eccentricities and celebrities. In this instance, conspicuous production was used as a perpetual advertisement for social relations guided by commodification. Self-branding, appearance, and image were of the utmost importance for contestants that sought a visible and status-oriented career as a fashion designer. To attain this status required ruthlessly competing to get to the top. *PR* privileged neoliberal ideals grounded in one's ability to produce and consume in the capitalist market. It did this by conspicuously producing and manufacturing new celebrities that were able to live an elite lifestyle.

### **The Battle over *Project Runway***

*PR* is a form of affluent lifestyle entertainment that connects Bravo to Lifetime, since the series ran for five seasons on Bravo before it moved to Lifetime in summer 2009. The move, which began as a legal battle between NBC Universal (Bravo's parent company) and The Weinstein Company (*PR*'s production company) over the airing of the fashion competition's sixth season, highlights the cultural and political economic value afforded to *PR*. Given the gendered nature of *PR*'s content and viewers, and the role this fashion competition played (and still plays) as an outlet for female consumption, this section uses the circumstances surrounding *PR*'s move to Lifetime as a lens to reflect on the cultural and political economic value afforded to affluent lifestyle entertainment. Through feminist

analysis and production studies, I analyze the legal battle over *PR*, examine the role *PR* eventually played in Lifetime's new brand image, and assess the implications these findings have for our understanding of affluent lifestyle entertainment.

In April 2008, Lifetime and The Weinstein Company purportedly reached a five year deal – worth an estimated \$200 million dollars – that allowed Lifetime to distribute the sixth season of *PR* (Multi Channel News Staff, 2008). Industry discourse on acquisition of *PR* suggests Lifetime was responding to Bravo's rise as an affluent entertainment network. For example, in April 2008 *The New York Times* noted that *PR* co-hosts Tim Gunn and Heidi Klum were being used in advertisements to spruce up the female cable network's brand image (Salkin, 2008). Indeed, Lifetime president and CEO (Andrea Wong) noted she wanted the Lifetime brand to evolve into a contemporary space that was aspirational, vibrant, and optimistic, and *PR* was the fashion competition being used to anchor Lifetime's new reality television line up (Salkin, 2008). At this point in time, according to *New York Times* journalist Allen Salkin (2008), Lifetime was known as the home for television content driven by women in peril, while Bravo was a cable network known for aspirational content and edgy guilty pleasures (Salkin, 2008).

Lifetime planned to air the sixth season of the fashion competition in November 2008. Accordingly, *PR* and its spinoffs played a prominent role in Lifetime's spring 2008 Upfront presentation (Lafayette, 2008). "Industry Upfronts" are an opportunity for networks to highlight distinct promotional strategies and the value of their audience commodity. There is a great deal at stake in the decisions surrounding this annual industry-wide promotional event, as it is a



primary venue to generate interest, excitement, and/or discussion amongst perspective clients (Lotz, 2007c). Lifetime's reliance on the *Runway* franchise at an instrumental industry wide promotional venue (Lafayette 2008) – that influences how perspective clients view the Lifetime brand and the audience commodity the network can provide to advertisers (Lotz 2007c) – further substantiates the fashion competition's commercial value and popular culture appeal. It is reasonable to presume that executives had an unwavering confidence in *PR*'s ability to support Lifetime's growth as a niche female cable network, given their willingness to invest in the franchise so heavily.

Wong's utilization of *PR* to ground Lifetime's contemporary brand image combined with the presence of the *PR* franchise at the 2008 Lifetime upfront is important for at least two reasons. First, it speaks to the reality competition's political economic and cultural value. Second, it is indicative of how content is homogenized in the digital media landscape. In relation to the second point, by 2008 Bravo was a gendered cable network driven by affluent lifestyle entertainment. While both Bravo and Lifetime catered to a female niche, Bravo had stronger ratings in the valuable 18-34 demographic sought by advertisers (Salkin, 2008). Within this context it is unsurprising that Lifetime sought to distribute the aspirational reality content that had secured Bravo's massive growth.

Prior to *PR*, Lifetime was best known for melodramatic content. Melodramatic content plays an important role in global communication. Most notably, soap operas and telenovelas are “televisual cultural products” that are gaining greater significance “because they embody the ultimate crossover

phenomenon of penetrating global markets, with a proven commercial product, while also giving pleasure to audiences” (Castaneda, 2011, p. 4). Melodrama serves as a salient link between Lifetime’s scripted and unscripted content. In particular, the queen bee stereotype embodied by the female lead in *Almost Golden* (Meehan & Byars, 2000) can be seen as a precursor to the vain personalities and emotional antics that characterize *PR*. According to feminist scholars Eileen Meehan and Jackie Byars (2000), *Almost Golden* exploited excessive melodrama via the self-destructive nature of the main female character (Jessica Savitch).<sup>124</sup> Overall, Lifetime executives afforded a great deal of value to melodramatic content. They even sought plot and character exaggerations that generated emotion in the dramatic series *Any Day Now* to increase ratings (Lotz, 2004). Melodrama and ratings serve as two similarities that span Lifetime’s scripted and unscripted television, whereas the ability to sell lifestyle interests and consumer practices in a reality format extremely conducive to branded entertainment is the most notable difference.

Lifetime’s effort to secure *PR* – an unscripted melodrama known for high ratings – did not go smoothly. In fact, NBC Universal (Bravo’s parent company) filed a lawsuit against the show’s producers (The Weinstein Company). The breach of contract lawsuit claimed the media conglomerate “had a right of first refusal should another network try to acquire ‘Runway’ and its spinoffs when Bravo’s deal expired” (Lafayette, 2008, para. 2). Both NBC Universal and Lifetime generated

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<sup>124</sup> Savitch, a newscaster who lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed, relied on her physical appearance and cutthroat desire to “clawed her way to the top” (Meehan & Byars, 2000, p. 45). As a broadcaster, Savitch evidenced a calm and restrained demeanor when on the air. In contrast, her histrionics during commercial breaks situated her as unhinged diva.

significant newspaper and trade journal coverage based on their respective efforts to hold on to the fashion show. As the process unfolded, paratextual discourse demonstrated, supported, and sustained *PR*'s valuable status as a form of affluent lifestyle entertainment with substantial commercial appeal.

NBC Universal filed its lawsuit against The Weinstein Company on April 7, 2008. Shortly after, the media conglomerate inked a first look deal with *PR* executive producers (Dan Cutforth and Jan Lipsitz). According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the deal ensured NBC Universal would have first right to any new projects from Cutforth and Lipsitz – the two executive producers that had been involved with *PR* since its infancy – should their legal efforts to hold on to the show fail (Schechner, 2008). As previously noted, the *PR* franchise was a large part of Lifetime's 2008 Upfront presentation, and the cable network planned to air season six of *Runway* in November 2008. In late September when a judge affirmed the injunction that NBC Universal requested, Lifetime was legally barred from promoting, marketing, and exhibiting *PR* (Lafayette, 2008).

The deposition filed on September 26, 2008 noted that NBC Universal legally established *Runway* was a powerful and unique program, and that the loss of a "program like Project Runway could result in harm which is not calculable by money damages" (*NBC Universal v. The Weinstein Company*, 2008, pp. 26-27). The Weinstein Company established that Lifetime was a growing cable network in the process of changing its image with innovative reality content, and that *PR* was a "game changer" that was expected to transform Lifetime. Yet this did work in their favor. Quite the contrary, establishing that *Project Runway* was a "game changer"

for Lifetime confirmed the plaintiff's assertions regarding the value of the show and led the judge to support NBC Universal's injunction request (*NBC Universal v. The Weinstein Company*, 2008).

Consistently across press coverage and legal documents, *PR* was situated as a show with stellar ratings and an immensely valuable media commodity. The season five finale, which aired on October 15, 2008, drew an estimated 4.79 million viewers in its 9 PM time slot, despite its subsequent airing with the third presidential debate. If the show's two encores are totaled, the finale reached approximately 7 million viewers, and about 4.79 million of them purportedly came from the demographic Madison Avenue covets the most (Multi Channel News Staff, 2008). While ratings are a constructed entity they play a central role in advertising revenue, as does the qualitative make-up of a network's audience commodity.

Two days after *PR*'s season five finale, Lifetime filed a counter suit against the Weinstein Company, Bravo, and NBC Universal in a Manhattan federal court. The counter suit argued federal copyright laws protected Lifetime's right to *PR*, and that this should supersede decisions made in state court (Frankel, 2008).

According to *Variety* journalist Daniel Frankel:

Lifetime's decision to include the Weinstein Co. in its suit against NBC Universal is a means of marking its "Runway" turf and trying to assert under the federal statute that because of the deal TWC signed with Lifetime, TWC is legally barred from allowing the rights to "Runway" or two planned spinoffs ("Models," "Project Pygmalion") to go to any other outlet – least of all Bravo. (2008, para. 10)

In December 2008 Judge Richard J. Sullivan relegated the battle to state court when he denied Lifetime's request to move the matter to a federal court (Grego, 2008). Lifetime's final legal maneuver took place in January 2009 when the cable

network filed a counter claim in state court. The legal document asserted Lifetime's exclusive rights to *PR*, *Models of the Runway*, and *Project Pygmalion* based on the \$20 million advance it paid to the Weinstein Company in February 2008 for the valuable franchise. Lifetime situated *PR* as a valuable asset that had a "loyal fan base and the ability to raise Lifetime's profile, increase its total advertising revenues and improve ratings across its entire programming schedule" (*Lifetime Entertainment Services Counterclaim*, 2009, p. 18).

What is most evident from the review of the data is that all parties involved – NBCU, The Weinstein Company, Lifetime Entertainment Services, and the Supreme Court of New York – viewed the *PR* franchise as a television asset with incalculable cultural and economic value, as did the press. For example, a *Washington Post* article discussing the April 2009 out-of-court settlement situated *PR* as a television jewel and noted NBC Universal's willingness to initiate costly legal action for the female network that paved *Runway's* road to popular culture fame (De Moraes, 2009a). The agreement reached between NBCU and The Weinstein Company also reinforced the commercial value afforded to *PR*. First, The Weinstein Company agreed to pay NBC Universal an undisclosed amount of money to move *PR* to Lifetime. Second, Harvey Weinstein agreed to issue a congratulatory statement to NBC for their litigation success. The undisclosed amount of money The Weinstein Company agreed to pay NBC Universal served as financial compensation for Bravo's loss of a TV jewel (De Moraes, 2009a). In contrast, Weinstein's statement congratulating NBCU appeared to be The Weinstein

Company's mea culpa for not giving the media conglomerate the opportunity to match Lifetime's offer (De Moraes, 2009a).

Heretofore I have illustrated the cultural and political economic value afforded to *PR* in the twenty-first digital media landscape. As a commercial crowned jewel (De Moraes, 2009a) both industry professionals and the legal system afforded immense value to this gendered franchise. But why was *PR* a commercial crowned jewel (De Moraes, 2009a)? Based upon my findings, *PR*'s cultural and political economic value came from its ability to function as an integrated spectacle (Debord, 1988) that supported the discursive and material iteration of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship, and I argue this happened in at least three ways.

First, *PR* relied on irony as an aesthetic commodity to advocate a neoliberal vision of career lifestyle. Self-branding, image and appearance were of the utmost importance to the contestants that sought a celebrity lifestyle. Moreover, the excess in *Runway* tended to present design competition, brilliant careers, and lavish consumer lifestyles as the "ultimate privilege and delight" (Douglas, 2010, p. 15). Second, *PR* offered gendered viewers a space to connect within a brand community driven by commodification. As we saw, *PR* fashionistas were called upon to consume and produce via branded entertainment grounded in gendered commodities. During its five seasons on Bravo, the effective brand management surrounding this series generated revenue and valuable cybernetic commodities.

Finally, *PR* offered gendered viewers a sexed subjectivity grounded in self-pleasing, hyper-sexuality, and affluent lifestyle across an array of interconnected texts, industries, platforms.

Sexed subjectivity is a twenty-first century adaptation of the tensions between capitalism and patriarchy. Today, there is much less attention to selflessness, domesticity, and traditional family in televised representations of women. Still, that does not mean capitalist patriarchy is not oppressive. To the contrary, neoliberal values like privatization and self-governance misleadingly presume the value of a market-driven lifestyle grounded in digital convergence. Of course, the insidious nature of inequalities that span intersecting forms of identity (e.g. gender, class, and race) cannot be remedied through individual action in the market. The form of postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship found in affluent lifestyle entertainment situates how we understand people's (especially women's) responsibility as consumers and citizens. Inordinate attention to the role lifestyle and consumption play in the lives of female subjects shapes and is shaped by the legacy of capitalist patriarchy. This legacy means recognition claims grounded in the emancipatory nature of neoliberal consumption are extremely precarious, as they tend to further reify a collective identity grounded in the seemingly natural status of the gendered consumer (Fraser, 2000).

By the late twenty-first century, Bravo's brand identity and largely female audience commodity received substantial media coverage. As we saw in the last chapter, trade journal and newspaper coverage suggested that Bravo's status as a gendered cable network played a formidable role first in NBC Universal's

acquisition of Oxygen, and then in the formation of Women@NBCU. From the commodified irony and conspicuous lifestyle exuded through affluent lifestyle entertainment like *PR*, to the female viewers the cable network sold to its clients, Bravo was situated as an advertising oasis that pulled in an influential, educated and upscale audience commodity advertisers were desperate to reach (Dominus, 2008). In the next chapter we examine *The Real Housewives*, the powerhouse franchise that followed *Project Runway*.



## CHAPTER 7

### CONSUMPTION, POLITICS, AND WOMEN'S TELEVISION: THE RISE OF *THE REAL HOUSEWIVES* (MEME) FRANCHISE

From fictional dramatic comedies like *The O.C.* (Fox); *Desperate Housewives* (ABC); and *Gossip Girl* (CW); to reality docudramas like *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (MTV); *The Hills* (MTV); and *Basketball Wives* (VH1), viewers were increasingly bombarded by affluent lifestyle entertainment across broadcast and cable networks in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Bravo capitalized on this trend with a well-branded reality docudrama attuned to affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption: *The Real Housewives*. Since the first installment of the series aired in March 2006 (*The Real Housewives of Orange County*), *The Real Housewives* has acquired a formidable national and international presence as a meme, and as a transmedia franchise.

The various American installments that followed *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (New York, Atlanta, New Jersey, Washington D.C., Beverly Hills, and Miami) are the reason why I refer to *The Real Housewives* as a “meme.” Inheritance, variation, and selection, are three central component of a meme (Blackmore, 1998). As we will see, *The Real Housewives* meme relies on important thematic and character elements that are passed along in each new installment. Still, the themes and characters interwoven across this meme are not exact replications. Instead, the producers make selections about how thematic and character elements will vary in each adaptation. Unfortunately, the selection and variation found in the different representations of wealth amongst the various installments exploit the

intersecting tensions amongst oppressed identity groups (gender, race, class, and ethnicity).

*The Real Housewives* is also a transmedia franchise that has effectively used brand management to establish a significant cultural presence, nationally and internationally. Bravo has launched multiple spin-offs in the United States with stars from the popular franchise (e.g. *Date My Ex*; *Bethenny Ever after*; and *The Kandi Factory*). Furthermore, the reach of this transmedia franchise can be seen in the move international filming locations (e.g. *The Real Housewives of Athens*); an NBC Universal lawsuit to prevent a similar program in Spain; and the syndication of the franchise in America (Koff, 2009a; Shen, 2010). In relation to the last point, American syndication, in 2009 *The Real Housewives (TRHW)* was sold to multiple local broadcast stations owned by Hearst Television; NBC Local Media; CBS; LIN Television Corporation; Post-Newsweek Stations; Local TV LLC; Media General, Inc.; Sinclair Broadcast Group; and Raycom Media. In the midst of these deals the president of NBC Local Media noted that daytime broadcast syndication allowed *TRHW* – a series he observed was immensely popular with women – to appeal to “a new audience that is looking for something that stands out from the pack” (Koff, 2009a, para. 4).

Like *Project Runway (PR)*, *TRHW* stands out as an immensely popular reality television franchise aired on a gendered cable network. Both shows exist within a television programming landscape saturated with reality content that circulates informal discursive/material guidelines for how women should perform as consumers (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). At a more specific level, it is useful to note

that *PR* and *TRHW* have differences and similarities. Like *TRHW*, *PR* has spawned multiple spin-offs (*Project Accessory* and *Project Runway All Stars*); has been adapted in various international locations (e.g. *Project Runway Canada*; *Project Runway Malaysia*; and *Project Runway Latin America*); and has generated imitations internationally (e.g. *Project Catwalk Netherlands* and *Project Catwalk United Kingdom*) and nationally (e.g. *Fashion Star* on NBC network). As two reality franchises, *PR* and *TRHW* are also different in several important ways. *PR*, a career competition that ran for five seasons on Bravo, aired on Lifetime starting with its sixth season in August 2009. The tenth season of *PR* launched in July 2012: since moving to Lifetime five seasons of *PR* have aired (Nordyke, 2012). In contrast, *TRHW* is a docudrama that has remained at Bravo for all of its installments and spinoffs, and as previously noted the show was sold for daytime syndication on broadcast television (Koff, 2009a).

My argument is that these two shows are representative of a new trend in television programming that has disconcerting cultural and political economic implications, and that they are emblematic of the role affluent lifestyle entertainment has come to play in contemporary American society. Such entertainment takes an overt approach to consumer and career lifestyle, uses irony as an aesthetic commodity, and effectively marries content and commerce across multiple interconnected platforms primed for selling products to a gendered audience. The aforementioned franchises are thus successful because of the neoliberal context in which they exist.

Affluent lifestyle entertainment has a resounding presence amongst various genres (e.g. fictional dramatic comedies and reality television); subgenres (e.g. reality docudramas and reality career competitions); mediums (e.g. books, television, and film); and distribution outlets (publishing, broadcasting, cable, movie theaters, and DVDs). Despite its rise in the twenty-first century, this type of media content is not entirely new. In fact, shows like *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Lifestyles of The Rich and Famous*, *Beverly Hill 90210*, and *Melrose Place* are notable precursors. Interestingly, as American popular culture has seen a rise in affluent lifestyle entertainment drowning in consumer discourse, there has been a simultaneous increase in program content driven by political discourse. Jeffery Jones (2005) points to television programs that foreground political processes; attend to important socio-political-economic issues; and foreground politicians. Like consumer discourse, political discourse has been a component of entertainment content since television's inception. Still, there has been a fundamental change in how political discourse and consumer discourse are incorporated into entertainment content. For example, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Real Time with Bill Maher* are three examples that speak to how coverage of politics, politicians, and salient societal issues are embedded in specific entertainment content. These three shows are defined by a humorous approach to political discourse that confronts the status quo. By contrast, *Sex and the City*, *Lipstick Jungle*, *The Real Housewives*, and *Project Runway* speak to the quantitative increase and qualitative shift in consumer discourse, as these shows predominately rely on

portrayals of affluent lifestyle, conspicuous consumption, and conspicuous production.

For the most part, affluent lifestyle entertainment has not delved into American politics. The first four installments of *TRHW* franchise – Orange County, New York, Atlanta, and New Jersey – refrained from engaging in political drama. In contrast, the fifth installment altered the franchise’s precedent when Bravo decided to turn to the dramatic, provocative, and outrageous realms of politics, policy, and American governance via *The Real Housewives of D.C.* As we will see, bringing *TRHW* to the nation’s capital allowed Bravo to exploit the pleasurable aspects of American politics (Jones, 2005), along with conspicuous consumption. It is of significant interest that *The Real Housewives of D.C.*, the only installment that incorporated attention to political life, was also the only installment of *TRHW* to be cancelled after the first season. As highlighted later in the chapter, multi-platform gendered content that exploits conspicuous lifestyle is not well suited for political discourse. Of course, political and consumer discourse coexist on television, as is evident via shows like *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Real Time with Bill Maher*.

Yet, there is something different about affluent lifestyle entertainment, and my case analysis highlights the vast limitations of this type of gendered content. I unravel how the dynamics between gender and consumption are articulated in *TRHW* franchise through a vast array of paratexts. Avid fans are of great importance to this franchise. Still, given the ubiquitous nature of the paratexts surrounding *TRHW*, the general public has had regular access to the themes and

personas used to articulate the gendered form of nouveau riche wealth this franchise has embodied since *The Real Housewives of Orange County* first aired in 2006. Paratexts frame program content, and they generate and sustain cultural buzz (Gray, 2010). In that vein, paratexts are the primary way the vast majority of Americans have come to know this iconic docudrama.

My findings illuminate how the basic content themes that are conveyed to the general public, as well as the primary character traits associated with the female reality personas that ground *TRHW* franchise, support the goals of capitalist patriarchy. Through my insights from feminist media studies and production studies, I illustrate the convergences and divergences in the portrayal of nouveau riche gendered wealth amongst the five different geographic locations – Orange County, New York, Atlanta, New Jersey, and Washington D.C. – attended to in this chapter. Given that cultural stereotypes surrounding intersecting social identities were used to represent the various tropes of nouveau riche gendered wealth in *TRHW* franchise, my feminist theoretical framework highlights the complex interactions amongst gender, sexuality, race, class, and ethnicity. Feminist media studies serves as a space to examine the dynamics between media representation and lived experience. I rely on a feminist theoretical framework attuned to the role political economy plays in the media texts that surround us. My incorporation of production studies allows for micro level political economic analysis attuned to how a specific network (Bravo) and franchise (*TRHW*) incorporate, circulate, shape, and are shaped by industrial and textual practices (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009).

In the sections that follow, I examine what *TRHW* franchise tells us about affluent lifestyle entertainment and postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship in contemporary America. First, I situate *TRHW* as a transmedia franchise. Here, I examine the role brand management plays in how we think about and engage this iconic meme. Next, I analyze the first five installments of *TRHW* franchise – Orange County, New York, Atlanta, New Jersey, and Washington D.C – in chronological order. In these sections, I highlight how the dynamics amongst three factors – gender role stereotypes; the affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of “American housewives;” and dysfunctional female characters – influence the embodiment of nouveau riche gendered wealth amongst the five different geographic locations under discussion.

### **Brand Management, Capitalist Excess, and Class Inequality**

The digital media landscape is in a state of transformation as branding, convergence, and commodification interweave in ways that make it challenging to distinguish them from one another. From the “natural” feel that surrounds these intertwined material processes and the sheer quantitative and qualitative presence they have amongst the cultural practices and social relations that guide our day-to-day lives, to the role these interpenetrating discursive entities play in how we think about and conceptualize our reality, it seems imminently necessary for scholars to engage the confluence of branding, convergence, and commodification. These three terms – branding, convergence, and commodification – are hallmarks of the promotional culture that characterizes the twenty-first century digital media landscape. The seamless presence of advertising

in day-to-day life is not new, as noted by Emily West and Matt McAllister (2013). Nonetheless, this team of scholars highlights the array of shifts amongst cultural, technological, and political economic processes that have led commoditization and branding “to penetrate our lives more than ever, as represented by discourses of personal branding and the exploding market in personal data generated by our online activities” (West & McAllister, 2013, p. 1).

In particular, industrial, cultural, and technological changes have supported and/or created the need for multi-platform blockbusters that mobilize multiple revenue streams, are conducive to an array of merchandising efforts, spawn spinoffs, and effectively engage multiple distribution outlets. These types of “transmedia franchises” are becoming more prevalent in the television industry, and they rely on the type of brand management and brand expansion driven by companies like Coke, Nike, and Tommy Hilfiger in the 1980s (Klein, 2000; Mann, 2009). For example, Denise Mann (2009) situates ABC’s fictional television series *Lost* as a transmedia franchise, and she examines the impact brand management played shaping this blockbuster. Here I examine the role brand management played in shaping the development *TRHW*. I situate the massive popularity of *TRHW* meme within the current cultural context, and I also consider how the outrageous antics of the financially privileged women in this transmedia franchise serve as a potent distraction in an era of serious economic turmoil.

In *NO LOGO* (2000) Naomi Klein argues that modern corporations produce brands not products. That means that the feelings conjured by a given brand are of the utmost importance. Strong brand cultures rely on, tap into, perpetuate, and



shape reality via the interpenetrating interactions amongst a product, its consumers, and its marketing environment (Banet Weiser, 2012). Still, brand cultures do not have limitless possibilities. Brand management speaks to the role industry production and structural constraints (political economic, cultural, and technological) play in confining the dynamics amongst product, consumers, and the marketing environment within a given brand culture. Since its inception, the brand management surrounding *TRHW* franchise and its breakout stars has been driven by the affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of notorious and dysfunctional characters interested in fashion, food, design, beauty, and popular culture.

*TRHW* arose in a particular cultural context and was derived from and shaped by trends in the digital media landscape. Accordingly, neoliberal values are embedded throughout *TRHW* franchise. In fact, all of Bravo's signature programming epitomizes the role self-governance and lifestyle interests have come to play in American culture. Each reality series chronicles the personal and/or professional endeavors of reality television personas. Most often, these characters are "ordinary people" that become celebrities based on their willingness to expose the general public to how they navigate career and consumer lifestyle (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). In fact, Lauren Zalaznick argues that Bravo's original programming highlights "people who are obsessed with what they believe is their life's work" (FORA.TV, 2010). For the breakout stars of *Project Runway*, *Top Chef*, and *Million Dollar Listing*, that means visible and status-oriented careers in fashion, food, and real estate, respectively. *TRHW* franchise offers a different take

on conspicuous production. *TRHW* franchise is a docudrama, not a career-based reality show. Accordingly, this franchise does not focus exclusively on a career in food, fashion, beauty, or design. Instead, this franchise first and foremost offers breakout stars a visible and status oriented career as a “pop culture icon.”

Since its inception, *TRHW* has capitalized on and fed into the shift toward affluent lifestyle entertainment. Starting with *The Real Housewives Orange County* (*TRHW OC*), the franchise was compared and contrasted to other forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment already on television. Most notably, *TRHW OC* was purportedly an ironic title for a reality show that tapped into the cultural zeitgeist surrounding shows like *The OC* and *Desperate Housewives*. For instance, during a 2010 interview Laruen Zalaznick noted how she was attempting to capitalize on the success of fictional programs that showcase lifestyle affluence when she approved *TRHW OC* (FORA.TV, 2010). While Zalaznick made this claim in February 2010, four years after the launch of *TRHW OC*. newspaper coverage for the premier season frequently compared the new reality series to fictional shows like *Desperate Housewives*, *The O.C.*, and *Gossip Girl*.

Similarities between *Desperate Housewives* and *TRHW OC* were attended to in various ways, and these similarities included, but not were not limited to: the opening montage, the shared theme of suburban dysfunction, and character similarities. For example, *Daily News* journalist Maria Guthrie (2006c) noted the similar use of fruit in the opening montage for both shows. The opening credits for *TRHW OC* culminate with the female stars holding oranges, and similarly the fictional characters of *Desperate Housewives* hold apples. Various journalists noted

how *TRHW OC* capitalized on the suburban dysfunction and glamour found in the story lines of *Desperate Housewives* and *The OC* (Guthrie, 2006c; McGrath, 2006; Pope, 2006). As with *TRHW OC*, journalists compared the second installment – *The Real Housewives of New York City (TRHW NY)* – to other forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment. *Cashmere Mafia*, *Lipstick Jungle*, *Gossip Girl*, and *Desperate Housewives* were offered as fictional shows with a similar emphasis (Lee, 2008; Lowry, 2008; Stanley, 2008a, and Stanley, 2008b). *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* was compared to fictional forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment such as: *Dirty Sexy Money* (ABC, 2007-2009), *Melrose Place* (Fox, 1992-1999), *Desperate Housewives*, and *The OC* (Clifford, 2009; Hinckley, 2009a). The parallels journalists made between the content and casts of *TRHW* franchise and the various dramatic comedies noted above, suggest Bravo's ability to effectively manage and direct discourse on *TRHW* franchise in the popular press. This most likely happened via a combination of the thematic and aesthetic attributes of *TRHW*, the personal and professional attributes of the cast, and Bravo's direct efforts to manage *TRHW* brand in the press.

Brand management moved beyond parallels with other forms of affluent lifestyle entertainment. Namely, *TRHW* franchise stood out due to its attention to fashion and provocative drama, presumably driven by dysfunctional characters. In a 2011 interview with Andy Cohen, *New York Times* journalist Horacio Silva highlighted how much *TRHW* franchise monopolized fashion dialogue. Cohen responded affirmatively, and then built upon Silva's point to engage the role *TRHW* franchise played as a form of guilt free gossip. Cohen argued *TRHW* was "guilt free

gossip” because viewers know these characters in a substantive way. Cohen suggested the housewives served as “friends” for viewers, and that viewers could talk about these “friends” behind their backs without repercussions (Silva, 2011). Cohen went on to talk about the great casting and stories, as well as the larger-than-life-characters found in the multiple installments of the franchise.<sup>125</sup> *TRHW*’s larger-than-life characters received formidable attention. In fact, Silva (2011) was interested in where Bravo finds cast members like NeNe Leakes, and both Cohen and Silva situated *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* cast member as a piece of work. As we will see in the next section dysfunctional female characters serve as a defining attribute of all the installments of *TRHW*. Cohen and Silva’s commentary vividly illustrates how *TRHW* is a gateway to celebrity status for a select few. My argument is that *TRHW* relies on the process of conspicuous production to manufacture and display “pop culture icons.” Standout characters like NeNe Leakes serve as a perpetual reminder of how appearance, image, and self-branding can be parlayed into a visible and status-oriented celebrity lifestyle.

Interestingly, Bravo did not envision *TRHW* as a franchise. Instead, a notable name shift for a program near completion and a program being proposed at Bravo followed the success of the premier season of *TRHW OC* (Bruce, 2012). *TRHW OC* was a project developed by Scott Dunlap, an entrepreneur and branding

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<sup>125</sup> Cohen does not talk about editing. To the contrary, he commented that “truth is stranger than fiction” and followed this up by noting his inability to predict what will happen on any given installment of *TRHW* after the cameras start rolling (Silva, 2011). Moreover, Cohen noted it was “incredible to see” how things unfolded in each installment (Silva, 2011).

consultant.<sup>126</sup> When the first season of *TRHW OC* aired, Bravo experienced a 47% increase in 18-49 viewers. Moreover, the median viewer age for the show was 34.4, making it the youngest-skewing show in Bravo's history (Bruce, 2012). During the filming of the second season of *TRHW OC*, three things happened. First, *Manhattan Moms* – a show in production at Bravo – was given a name change near the end of the production process. Interestingly, the cast was not made aware that the show would be called *The Real Housewives of New York* until Bravo began shooting press photos (Bruce, 2012). Second, True Entertainment approached Bravo with footage that included NeNe Leakes from filming in Atlanta, and *The Real Housewives Atlanta* was born. Finally, Bravo sought out a production company (Siren Media) to create *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* (Bruce, 2012). These three developments gave birth to *The Real Housewives* meme.<sup>127</sup> The quantitative and qualitative shifts that occurred in audience composition at Bravo following *TRHW OC* most likely played a substantial role in this decision. As we will see in later sections, Bravo is most interested in female viewers under 40.

The synergistic nature of this transmedia franchise is readily apparent in the paratexts that surround *TRHW*. For example, the 2010/2011 edition of the *Bravo Affluencer* touted the salient role live voting/polling plays in the franchise.

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<sup>126</sup> Dunlap initially sought to make a short film about life inside the gated community of Coto de Caza. He came up with the idea at a boring nouveau riche dinner party he attended in Orange County in 1997. The film was never made. Ten years later after multiple rejections Dunlap proposed his idea to Bravo (Bruce, 2012).

<sup>127</sup> The thematic and character elements found in *TRHW* meme are analyzed in the next five sections of this chapter. As we will see, the elements passed along in each new installment are not exact replications. Instead, producers exploit the intersecting tensions amongst oppressed identity groups (gender, race, class, and ethnicity), and this leads to variations in the representations of gendered wealth.

Prospective advertising clients were tantalized with viewers who participated in polling and voting via computer or mobile phone, on topics that ranged from wildest housewife and hottest couple, to favorite tanning method. Similarly, *The Real Housewives of The Web* is another example of how Bravo has extended the viewer experience. This promotional effort offered prospective advertisers access to fans that were competing to become a web-based real housewife. It also engaged viewers interested in following this process via mediums such as mobile/online videos, blogs, and photo galleries (*Bravo Affluencer*, 2010/2011).

In-house promotional materials targeted toward potential advertisers highlight the popular appeal of *TRHW* franchise and reinforce the thematic elements previously identified. The 2011/2012 edition of *Bravo Affluencer* compelled advertisers to “get in on the pop culture phenomenon with Bravo’s most successful docu-drama series divas and share in their glamorous lifestyles as they get down and dirty” (p. 42). The quote explicitly highlights the role lifestyle affluence (e.g. glamorous lifestyle) and dysfunctional female characters (down and dirty) play in the franchise. Moreover, it implicitly speaks to conspicuous consumption and gender role stereotypes via the attention to the glamorous lifestyle of so-called divas. In fact, the images that are paired with the text all show characters from the various geographic locations impeccably dressed, engaged in activities such as doing drinking and socializing.

Overall, Bravo has capitalized on press coverage and culture buzz surrounding *TRHW* and other Bravo signature shows. In the same section of the *Bravo Affluencer* discussed above, it was noted that *TRHW* was ranked seventh

amongst Google searches for TV franchises in 2010 (*Bravo Affluencer*, 2011/2012). Similarly, at the end of this business-to-business marketing effort appears a page on Bravo's "Break Through Press" (*Bravo Affluencer*, 2011/2012). Articles on *TRHW* franchise from *The New York Times*, *People*, and *Bloomberg Businessweek* are highlighted on this page. The article from *Bloomberg Businessweek* is of particular interest, as it attended to the multiple screens viewers engaged to access *TRHW*. In this instance, Gillette (2010) highlighted the simultaneous engagement of traditional television viewing and online interactivity via the Bravo Talk Bubble. The Bravo Talk Bubble is an interactive feature that allows viewers to talk with each other on the Bravo website. Of the 2.6 million viewers who watched the third season finale of *TRHW NY*, only a relatively small number (13,000) used Talk Bubble. Still, *TRHW's* incorporation of "companion-viewing" purportedly led to a 53% increase in digital advertising sales in comparison to the same time period in the prior year (Gillette, 2010). Bravo started its effort in companion viewing in 2009 when it hosted an online "virtual viewing party" for the second season finale of *TRHW NY*. These types of dual viewing tactics allow Bravo to sell the attention of their audience two times, and the belief amongst industry professionals is that dual viewing diminishes the threats surrounding the DVR (Gillette, 2010). Bravo conducted internal research during the final three episodes of the third season of *TRHW NY*, and according to Lisa Hsia – the executive that lead Bravo's digital operations – the Talk Bubble drove up ratings. The executive claimed that Talk Bubble led to an average of 250,000 additional viewers per episode (Gillette, 2010).

Viewer engagement via the Internet and social media is integral to brand management in the digital media landscape. While viewer engagement has helped to shift perceptions regarding the producer-consumer relationship (Lury, 2004), interactive viewer content is of significant value to advertisers and program distributors. For example, a case study that relied on IAG primetime research between January 2009 and December 2009 noted the brand value associated with *TRHW OC*. In particular, a Sprint wireless advertisement linked with a custom webisode driver offered a 71% increase in brand recall, 138% increase in likeability, and 71% increase in message recall (*Bravo Affluencer*, 2010/2011). Sprint's "A Day In The Life" webisode allowed avid fans to follow Orange County housewives during their daily activities (Koff, 2009b). Simultaneously, this interactive viewing experience not only supported commodity sales for Sprint, it also generated valuable cybernetic commodities for the Bravo cable network via advanced monitoring and surveillance techniques.

As is evident thus far, *TRHW's* is not only a well-established meme with a significant cultural presence nationally and internationally,<sup>128</sup> it is also a transmedia franchise with immense political economic value. As a transmedia franchise with an estimated worth of a half billion dollars, *TRHW* has spawned new commercial endeavors for participants and/or executives affiliated with it (Bruce, 2012). Many of the franchise's stars have amassed great fortunes by developing brand identities that encompass and move beyond their participation in the show.

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<sup>128</sup> March 2012 brought the release of a Vancouver spinoff. Simultaneously, casting was underway in France, while Australia's Gold Coast, the United Kingdom, and Asia – including Singapore, Hong Kong, and Indonesia – were the next overseas ventures for the reality docudrama (Bruce, 2012).



Bravo purportedly offers cast members an unparalleled opportunity for brand development. As a vivid illustration, by 2012, housewives from the various geographic locations had facilitated product deals with an array of commodities (e.g. jewelry, sex toys, and make-up); published over one dozen books; had an average Twitter following of over 100,000; and released various singles (Bruce, 2012). In relation to the last point, over ten cast members released singles that have had varying levels of success. Kim Zolciak's song "Tardy for the Party" is one of the most successful examples with 101,000 downloads (Halperin, 2011). Simultaneously, specific individuals associated with the franchise have become household names for individuals attuned to American popular culture. Bethenny Frankel (*Bethenny Ever After* and *Bethenny Getting Married*), Kim Zolciak (*Don't Be Tardy for the Wedding*) and Kandi Burruss (*The Kandi Factory*) all landed Bravo spinoffs. Whereas, Andy Cohen – a male executive at Bravo who has been critical to the franchises' success and hosts *TRHW* reunion shows – used his newfound popularity to launch his own television show, *Watch What Happens Live*.

Many of the housewives have delved into an array of business ventures due to their newfound fame. Most notably, Bethenny Frankel launched her Skinnygirl cocktail line and then sold Skinnygirl to the fourth largest liquor distributor in the world (Fortune Brands' Beam Global) for \$120 million in 2011 (Bruce, 2011). Frankel, a *New York Times* best selling author<sup>129</sup> who has a loyal following across

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<sup>129</sup> Her first book *Naturally Thin* had 18 weeks on the best-seller list for the New York Times, while her second book *The Skinnygirl Dish* sold over 480,000 copies throughout the world (Bruce, 2011).

Facebook, Twitter, and Bethanny.com,<sup>130</sup> is situated as a mega-entrepreneur based on her popularity and various professional ventures. The reality star has secured various endorsement deals (e.g. Hanes, Pampers, and Bluefly); developed a publishing franchise and workout DVD (Body By Bethenny); and expanded on Skinnygirl with a diet cleanse, weight loss supplements, and a shape wear line (Bruce, 2011). In fall 2013, Frankel launched a daytime talk show. In an article in *USA Today* announcing the talk show, Frankel highlighted how the three Bravo-based reality shows she was involved in – *TRHW NY*, *Bethenny Ever After*, and *Bethenny Getting Married* – had generated a female audience for her upcoming talk show (Keveney, 2013). Frankel went on to note how revealing herself and her life generated a relationship with viewers. Frankel added, "There's a trust. It's a new world, a new regime now, where you can't go on TV and be one person and be another person off-camera" (Keveney, 2013, n.p.). Frankel's commentary speaks to the misguided belief that a star's TV persona aligns with who they are in real life. This presumed authenticity is of the utmost value for celebrity endorsements.

The networked effort at commodity sales by many of the stars of *TRHW* franchise needs to be contextualized. Celebrity endorsements have a long history dating back to the move to color television in 1965 (Feinman, 2011). Initially, some celebrities were reluctant to endorse products, but over time this reluctance has disappeared. By the final decades of the twentieth century, celebrity product integration arose as a new type of celebrity endorsement practice (Feinman, 2011). For example, in 1984 Michael Jordan was "paid \$2.5 million dollars for a

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<sup>130</sup> According to *The Hollywood Reporter* Frankel has 500,000 followers on Twitter and Facebook as of April 2011.

five year contract, which allowed Nike to use the Jordan name and required Jordan to wear the sneakers during games” (Feinman, 2011, p. 108). By the 1990s, celebrities were creating their own products (e.g. Elizabeth Taylor launched her “White Diamonds” perfume in 1991). Following Taylor’s success with White Diamonds, other celebrities followed suit.

Celebrity commodity sales morphed again in the early twenty first century. During the 1990s, “the theory was that effort and money were necessary to become famous and create a commercially exploitable persona,” and this investment purportedly meant celebrities were “entitled to the fruits of their labor” (Feinman, 2011, p. 109). Today, with the massive influx of reality television and the societal value afforded to “being known,” popular culture ubiquity serves as the main entry point to celebrity commodity sales. As we have seen, *TRHW* franchise manufactures and displays breakout stars via the process of conspicuous production. Bethenny Frankel and NeNe Leakes serve as perpetual reminders of how appearance, image, and self-branding can be parlayed into a visible and status-oriented celebrity lifestyle.

As previously mentioned, Frankel claims to have a relationship with viewers. Frankel uses this relationship to sell commodities via social media. For example, she has used her Facebook wall to sell Pampers diapers by sharing personal moments (e.g. “Watching my baby Bryn crawl on the floor in her adorable Pampers diapers!”), while providing no disclosure related to her product endorsement (Feinman, 2011, p. 130). If the individual accessing Frankel’s Facebook page clicks on the word “Pampers” the user is taken to the Facebook

page for Pampers, and again there is no effort to disclose Frankel's role as a spokesperson. This one example is representative of how celebrity endorsements are embedded in nontraditional advertising venues (e.g. Twitter and Facebook). This type of product integration is not inconspicuous. Still, conspicuous consumption via presumably "authentic" celebrity endorsement is an effective means of selling commodities, and visible disclosures are most likely not used because they detract from the seemingly close connection amongst the star, the audience, and the product being sold.

*TRHW* brand and its stars seamlessly, although not inconspicuously, sell commodities across an array of interconnected technological platforms. The brand management surrounding this transmedia franchise is situated in a vast web with tentacles that reach out in multiple directions via various commercial endeavors that are specifically tied to and/or move beyond multiplatform programming content, advertising, merchandising, and licensing. As a form of integrated spectacle (Debord, 1988), *TRHW* franchise relies on brand management, cybernetic commodification, digital convergence to manage gendered viewers who have value as consumers and producers. *TRHW* franchise has built upon and refined the commodity-oriented approach taken in *Sex and the City (SATC)*. Both of these iconic franchises have established multiplatform brand identities via a gendered approach to commodity consumption that spans various interlocking consumer realms – fashion, food, design, beauty and popular culture. The multiplication and replication of both franchises over time offers insight into how affluent lifestyle entertainment is produced and reproduced in the digital media

landscape. *Sex and the City* and *The Real Housewives* are two prominent media franchises that limit that creativity, choice, and diversity via “their mechanistic, almost viral drive toward self-replication” (Johnson, 2012, p. 2).

Like *SATC*, a large part of *TRHW*'s success can be linked to the role irony plays as an aesthetic commodity in the franchise. As with its most prominent predecessor, *TRHW* capitalizes on ironic content that allows for viewers to ridicule, but not seriously critique power relations grounded in capitalist patriarchy. An excerpt from *The Hollywood Reporter* is worth quoting at length because it broadly engages the over-the-top nature of this cultural artifact.

Yes, these women are rich (or at least lost more money than most people make in a lifetime). Yet the franchise has become a perfect distraction for viewer in the age of Occupy Anything. It's kind of a train-wreck television that Americans, with all their woes, probably shouldn't be watching; but on any given night, 2 million of them – mostly women ages 18-49 are glued to one version or another of the multipronged soap opera ready to blast, blame or bewail the kind of behavior that's left even Oprah aghast. (Bruce, 2012, para. 8)

As can be seen above, *TRHW* readily exploits excess. The female characters are shown engaging in conspicuous consumption and living affluent lifestyles. These women are represented as shallow, superficial, egotistical, and dysfunctional. Moreover, the franchise is known for female personas that epitomize cultural stereotypes tied to the tensions amongst gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity. The franchise's ability to serve as a distraction in a time of economic uncertainty can in part be attributed to the excessive nature of the nouveau riche gendered wealth being represented.

My main argument is that the ironic portrayal of capitalist patriarchy evoked in *TRHW* has a discursive and material presence that exceeds individual

interpretation. The cultural ethos of *TRHW* meme limits the parameters of female subjectivity at the macro level in at least two ways. First, the self-pleasing, hypersexuality, and affluent lifestyle advocated relies on well-established gendered realms (food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture) that offer limited flexibility. This reified collective identity supports the seemingly natural status of the gendered consumer. Second, *THRW* offers a market-driven lifestyle grounded in privatization and self-governance as a viable route to equality. When in reality, collective action is necessary to challenge the insidious inequalities that characterize capitalist patriarchy.

At individual level, it is necessary to highlight that interpreting an ironic scene requires oscillating between literal and ironic meaning (Hutcheon, 1994). This rapid hermeneutic movement allows for subversion and complicity, assuming the ironic intent is decoded. From this perspective, the overwhelming presence of conspicuous consumption (the literal meaning) is just as important as the reaction shot (the ironic meaning) that allows for, but does not ensure, ironic interpretation. Given that *TRHW* franchise has become an extremely effective route to selling gendered commodities, it clear that at least some female viewers consume in ways that resemble the cast, just on a much smaller scale. Here we get insight in to how irony function as aesthetic commodity. Ambivalence allows a viewer to critique the excessive representation of conspicuous consumption while still literally or figuratively buying into the gendered consumer lifestyles being portrayed.

Ultimately, *TRHW* offers distraction in a time of economic turmoil because: (1) it is a cultural meme grounded in capitalist patriarchy that constrains the parameters of female subjectivity; (2) it is cultural text that provides space for female viewers to distinguish themselves from and judge conspicuous consumption, while still leaving room for aspirational identification; and (3) it is a transmedia franchise that moves beyond vicarious consumption to effectively sell gendered commodities, thereby supporting the goals of capitalist patriarchy. Moreover, *TRHW* franchise does this across multiple technological platforms that are conferred with democratic legitimacy due to new levels of audience interactivity, customization, and engagement. Now we turn to the campy dramedy in *TRHW* franchise. This ironic content is driven by gender role stereotypes; the affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of “American housewives;” and dysfunctional female characters. In the sections that follow, I highlight how the dynamics amongst these three factors influence the embodiment of nouveau riche gendered wealth in paratextual discourse across five different installments of *TRHW* franchise.

### **Nouveau Riche Gendered Wealth in Orange County**

*TRHW OC* cast consisted of five White heterosexual women: Kimberly Bryant, Vicki Gunvalson, Jeana Keough, Jo de La Rosa, and Lauri Warning Peterson. The paratexts surrounding this installment highlight how the embodiment of nouveau riche gendered wealth was articulated via the trope of the White heterosexual trophy wife. *TRHW OC* cast members were situated as “real life” counterparts to the fictional characters on *Desperate Housewives*. Kimberly Bryant

was seen as a stand-in for Lynette Scavo, a character played by Felicity Huffman on *Desperate Housewives*. Jo de La Rosa was said to resemble the fictional character played by Eva Longoria (Gabrielle Solis) in both appearance and behavior. De La Rosa's behavioral resemblance with her *Desperate Housewives* counterpart came from living with a fiancé who wanted her to "party less and clean house more" (McGrath, 2006, p. 1). Similarly, the pampered ladies on *TRHW OC* and the fictional characters of *The OC* were linked in the realms of physical beauty and demeanor (Bianculli, 2006b; Shales, 2006).

Overall, *TRHW OC* cast fit many of the criteria for gender role stereotypes tied to the physical appearance of "desirable" women (e.g. blonde, thin, fashionable, and large breasts), and myopic attention to the aesthetic attributes of female cast members was a prominent theme in paratexts surrounding the show. As previously noted, gender role stereotypes played a role in the five geographic locations under discussion in this chapter. In Orange County, gender role stereotypes primarily focused on the physical beauty and sexual appeal of White heterosexual women with long hair, large breasts, and thin bodies.

As an illustration, the Playboy brand had a noteworthy presence in *TRHW OC*. Cast member Jeana Keough was identified as a former Playboy Playmate, and other cast members attempted to attend/attended parties at the Playboy Mansion. For example, Lauri Waring got photographed in an effort to attend a Playboy Mansion pajama party, while cast member Jo de La Rosa attended a party at the Playboy Mansion (Bellafante, 2006; Bellafante, 2007). Playboy is a cultural brand known for objectification of women that capitalizes on male sexual fantasies. From



the images and content in *Playboy* Magazine, to the ubiquitous parties at the Playboy mansion with scantily clad women, this brand is associated with gratuitous gender role objectification, which *TRHW OC* highlighted.

Male sexual fantasies were evident in *TRHW OC* in other ways as well. Lauri Waring was an object of sexual desire when fellow housewife Vicki Gunvalson had girlfriends over for a hot tub party. Waring – a cast member who was committed to never looking a day older than thirty-two – and her bikini got the attention of Gunvalson’s 19-year-old son and his friends. In fact, both Waring and Gunvalson are situated as the “pinnacle of sexual fantasy in a world where status codes seem largely determined by teenage boys” (Bellafante, 2006, p. 40). Although nothing occurred between the female leads and the teenage boys, the presence of the Playboy brand in *TRHW OC*, along with scenes driven by the sexual fantasies of young males, speak to how producers sought to represent gender. *TRHW OC* cast members were trophies that local teenage boys sought to score with and that adult males relied on as status symbols that asserted their male prowess (Brooks, 1995).

Partners and extended family also reinforced the sexual objectification of female cast members. Jeana Keough – the former Playboy Playmate – was married to a retired Major League Baseball pitcher. Keough’s husband and mother-in-law purportedly selected her as a mate based on genetics and breeding potential (McGrath, 2006). Similarly, Kimberly Bryant was a mother in her forties who increased her breast size from A to D. Despite this change, Bryant was still afraid her husband was going to trade her in for a “newer and better wife” (Guthrie,

2006c). As can be seen, genetics, mating potential, and sex appeal were of the utmost importance in *TRHW OC*.

Of course, part of the appeal of *TRHW OC* is the irony with which this misogyny is presented. The presumption is that awareness of the ironic intent and laughing at the “retrograde” depictions of women equals an outright rejection of the stifling aspects of hyper-sexuality being portrayed. Yet this take not only mistakenly presumes a subversive reading, it also ignores the salient role capitalist patriarchy plays in women’s discursive and material reality. My argument is that the irony in *TRHW* is an aesthetic commodity that effectively navigates subversion and complicity. The subversion comes from the easy rejection of the excess being presented. It comes from the judgment of Jeana Keough and Kimberly Bryant for their unrestrained embrace of hyper-sexuality. It comes from the over-the-top portrayal of self-centered trophy wives obsessed with the aging process and their physical attributes. Still, affluent lifestyle entertainment is an extremely effective mode to sell commodities across the fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture industries. From this perspective, it is clear that viewers are not wholeheartedly rejecting the values of capitalist patriarchy.

If we treat irony as a discursive strategy, and examine how it functions via hermeneutic movement between literal and ironic meaning (Hutcheon, 1994), we get insight into the reason why shows like *TRHW OC* are able to effectively sell gendered commodities. Hermetic movement is what establishes irony’s value as an aesthetic commodity. Viewers oscillate between judging an unenlightened cast that exemplifies the excess of capitalist patriarchy on the one hand, and placing value in

the gendered lifestyle interests that ground capitalist patriarchy on the other. Ultimately, media savvy female viewers flattered by their ability to “see through the craven self-absorption” (Douglas, 2010, p. 14) feel superior to shallow and superficial trophy wives driven by affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption, the second theme embedded in *TRHW OC*.

As would be expected, affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption play a central role throughout *TRHW* franchise. In particular, Coto de Caza – the community where *TRHW OC* was based – offered luxurious living via high-end real estate with swimming pools, hot tubs, basketball courts, screening rooms, and marble foyers (Bellafante, 2006; Hinckley, 2007). The average mansion in Coto de Caza costs about \$1.6 million (McGrath, 2006). The posh gated community relied on restricted access to keep people out.<sup>131</sup> The life of leisure led by the cast meant waking up with nothing to do and holding down simple jobs (Bianculli, 2006b; McGrath, 2006; Shales, 2006). Yet there were a variety of nouveau riche activities available to pass the day – trips to the salon with their daughters, talking about men, dinner parties, martini lunches, tennis lessons, shopping, trendy bars, drinking white wine in a hot tub, and crashing sorority parties. Paratexts situated the cast within a nouveau riche utopia grounded in shopping, socializing, and leisure. Some attention was given to the time these women spent with their children. Yet attention to the role work played in these character’s lives was virtually nonexistent in the paratexts surrounding the show.

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<sup>131</sup> The majority of the cast lived in Coto de Caza. Lauri Waring, a divorced single mother was the only housewife that did not. Waring claimed she was exiled from the gated community to a small townhouse following the break-up of her marriage (McGrath, 2006).

Personal ownership of expensive commodities was another way conspicuous consumption was present in *TRHW OC*. Driving a Mercedes or BMW were common occurrences for the cast and their children. In one instance, the teenage son of one cast member had his “feminine” Mercedes replaced with a “masculine” one when his friends teased him about the vehicle (Shales, 2006). In another instance, a cast member bought a brand new BMW to replace a Mercedes with a window button that did not work (McGrath, 2006). In this vein, expensive commodities were situated as easily acquired objects that could be replaced without consequences. Ostentatious displays of wealth were complemented by lingering shots of the affluence the surrounded the characters. In fact, most of the cast appeared to have unlimited amounts of money (Hinckley, 2007). Even Laurie, the divorced mother who lived in what she referred to as an itty-bitty townhouse and purportedly had the hardest life (McGrath, 2006), had the luxury to go diamond shopping (Shattuck, 2006). Moreover, the cast frequently disclosed the specific cost and/or status associated with their luxurious commodities and services. For example, Jo Del La Rosa had a six-figure diamond engagement ring (Bianculli, 2006b); Kimberly Bryant’s breast implants cost \$7,000 (Guthrie, 2006c); and Jeana Keough – a cast member who worked as a real estate agent – was only willing to deal in high-end homes (Hinckley, 2007).

The final theme found in *TRHW* franchise is the focus on dysfunctional female characters, who commonly had limited personal insight. *TRHW OC* cast were represented as a group of dysfunctional women unaware of their class privilege. For example, cast member Jo De La Rosa complained about how hard it is

“to wake up at 6:30 in the morning and do nothing” in the first season (Bianculli, 2006b, p. 82). Annoying comments were commonplace, and journalists argued they came from self-deluded and unappealing female personas seemingly oblivious to how they were being ridiculed by producers. In fact, journalists argued that watching *TRHW OC* made viewers feel better about their lives (Bianculli, 2006b; McGrath, 2006; Shales, 2006). In particular, one journalist noted that female viewers could feel superior to the cast of *TRHW OC* because they were not stupid enough to participate in this type of reality show (McGrath, 2006). These unlikeable women were characterized as vain and self-deluded. Moreover, it was argued that their behavior was so unimaginable that even writers for the satirical fictional drama *The OC* would not have attempted to concoct scenarios found on its reality counterpart (Bianculli, 2006b). Laughter and melodrama grounded in wobbly marriages and screwy relationships added to these women being situated as pathetic individuals that made viewers feel better about their own lives (Hinckley, 2007; McGrath, 2006; Shales, 2006).

From stereotypical gender role expectations tied to physical beauty and sexuality, to conspicuous consumption, lifestyle affluence, and dysfunctional female characters, *THRW OC* relied on irony as an aesthetic commodity to flatter viewers. Unappealing and self-absorbed women primarily interested in a consumer lifestyle ultimately became the model for *TRHW* franchise. The three elements found in *TRHW OC* – gender role stereotypes; the affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of rich housewives; and dysfunctional female characters – were played out with varying degrees in future versions of *TRHW* franchise,

regardless of the geographic location, race, and/or ethnicity of the cast. Still, the way in which these elements were articulated shaped the vision of nouveau riche gendered wealth embodied in each geographic location.

In Orange County the sexual appeal of White heterosexual trophy wives driven by personal vanity served as the primary trope. From plunging necklines and bikinis, to breast augmentation, facial reconstruction, and lip plumping, *TRHW OC* cast were represented as a group of self-indulgent middle-aged women with little to worry about beyond aging and cellulite (Stanley, 2007b). The show's producers situated physical attractiveness and sex appeal as the main assets these housewives had to offer, and they presented the female cast members as arm candy to buttress the worth of their male counterparts (Brooks, 1995). Like its Orange County counterpart, the New York-based installment of the series relied on the lives of privileged White women. Yet the vision of nouveau riche gendered wealth it embodied was articulated in a slightly different way.

### **Nouveau Riche Gendered Wealth in New York**

New York was the second geographical location Bravo used to offer a cultural portrait of American "housewives." *TRHW NY* cast consisted of Alex McCord, Jill Zarin, Bethenny Frankel, Ramona Singer, and Countess LuAnn de Lesseps. Here, I examine how nouveau riche gendered wealth was embodied via the three themes previously identified: gender role stereotypes; the affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of rich housewives; and dysfunctional characters female characters. Unlike in *TRHW OC*, the paratexts surrounding *TRHW NY* situated the cast as savvy businesswomen who earned their own money.

Much more attention was paid to the role that professional endeavors played in the lives of *TRHW NY* cast. For example, Ramona Singer owned a fashion merchandising company. Similarly, LuAnn de Lesseps and Jill Zarin are situated in careers linked to gendered interests. Former model LuAnn de Lesseps authored an etiquette book titled *Class with the Countess*, and Jill Zarin owned a fabric/design company. Bethenny Frankel was a contestant on *The Apprentice: Martha Stewart* prior to being cast on *TRHW NY*; accordingly her forte was cooking and home design.

Throughout the five geographic locations discussed in this chapter, the types of job held by cast members were well suited for shopping and socializing (Cox, 2012). This pattern has two disconcerting implications. First, it presents a gendered view of female employment driven by food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture. Second, as we have seen, a plethora of business ventures grounded in food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture are embedded within this powerhouse franchise. In relation to the first concern – the gendered view of female employment – we find that *TRHW NY* focused more on gender role stereotypes in the professional realm.

In particular, *TRHW NY* cast all worked in careers that aligned well with shopping and socializing, and their female-oriented professional endeavors were given concerted attention. *TRHW NY* was not driven by the sexual appeal of the White heterosexual trophy wives. Instead, the primary gender role stereotype found amongst the New York housewives was their affinity for female-oriented careers. For example, one journalist noted that the cast of *TRHW NY* resembled

characters in two fictional dramas: *Cashmere Mafia* and *Lipstick Jungle* (Clark, 2008). The female personas amongst these three shows – *TRHW NY*, *Cashmere Mafia*, and *Lipstick Jungle* – were all identified as ambitious career women seeking a balance between economic and familial nirvana (Clark, 2008).

As with *TRHW OC*, *TRHW NY* cast was White, thin, attractive, heterosexual, and fashionable. Still, less attention was given to gratuitous sexual appeal. Instead, paratexts situated this cast as “refined” and “classy” women who moved in elite social circles (Clark, 2008; Hinckley, 2008a). Of course, lifestyle affluence and conspicuous consumption were main areas of interest for *TRHW NY* cast, and the premier season focused on how these aspiring socialites spent their fortunes. Cast member Alex McCord’s conspicuous consumption and attention to social status was the subject of a great deal of attention. In the series premier, McCord spent close to six figures purchasing evening wear from a designer boutique while vacationing in St. Bart’s (Stanley, 2008a; Clark, 2008).

McCord also helped set the tone for *TRHW NY* with her attention to the role status played in social hierarchy amongst upper-crust New Yorkers. Finding the right private schools and summer homes, making appropriate donations, and attending the right social events were of the utmost importance to McCord. In fact, to be a part of New York Society, McCord and her husband became Metropolitan Opera patrons. McCord’s New York pretension was readily exploited in promotional spots for *TRHW NY*, which showed her grimacing as she claimed she would never “live in the suburbs” (Lee, 2008, p. 1). The entire cast conveyed an affinity for image and status. For example, Zarin discussed the financial costs and



obligations (e.g. political events, charity events, and naming rights for buildings/hospitals) associated with being a part of Manhattan's elite (Lee, 2008).

Moving beyond *TRHW OC*, *TRHW NY* provided a detailed account of the role social status and "appropriate taste" played in the lives of the female personas that comprised the cast. From multi-million dollar homes and shopping extravaganzas, to front row seats at New York Fashion week and vacations in the Hamptons, the show's representation of five self-absorbed women dressed in expensive designer clothing offered an economically distasteful view of affluent, ambitious women, working in female-oriented careers that aligned well with shopping and socializing.

As was previously noted, the female characters found in *TRHW NY*, *Cashmere Mafia*, and *Lipstick Jungle* were all identified as ambitious career women seeking a balance between economic and familial nirvana (Clark, 2008). Yet there was an important difference: the cast of *TRHW NY* did not evoke empathy. Instead, these reality stars fostered an "active sense of antipathy" (Lowry, 2008, p. 6). Pretentious posing/posturing was common amongst *TRHW NY* cast. In fact, the dysfunctional female characters purportedly evoked a shallowness that made this cast even harder to stomach than their Orange County predecessors (Clark, 2008; Lowry, 2008). For example, in the first season, cast members claimed they were part of an elite New York social circle, noted how others aspired to be like them, discussed how fabulous their lives were, and highlighted the challenges they faces as a result of their social obligations in New York society (Clark, 2008; Hinckley, 2009b; Lowry, 2008; and Stanley, 2008a).

As we have seen, the nouveau riche gendered wealth embodied in *TRHW OC* was attuned to the role physical attributes and sex appeal played in the lives of White West Coast trophy wives driven by personal vanity. Of course, *TRHW NY* also relied on the objectification of the female body. Still, *TRHW NY* relied on a slightly different trope. The New York cast was represented as a group of pretentious, career-oriented women driven by social status. Thus far, my discussion of *TRHW* franchise has attended to how two White heterosexual female casts embodied nouveau riche gendered wealth in slightly different ways. In the section that follows, I turn to how nouveau riche gendered wealth was embodied by Black heterosexual women in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

### **Nouveau Riche Gendered Wealth in Atlanta**

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta (TRHW AT)* premiered in October 2008. The cast was comprised of five women who exhibited visual markers and/or personally identified within the context of the show as: African American (Sheree Whitfield, NeNe Leakes, and Deshawn Snow), Caucasian (Kim Zolciak), and Asian/African American (Lisa Wu Hartwell). The articulation of nouveau riche gendered wealth in *TRHW AT* capitalized on problematic stereotypes tied to the demeanor, etiquette, taste, spending habits, and monetary acquisition of African American women. Here I examine the role African American stereotypes tied to class played in the embodiment of nouveau riche gendered wealth in *TRHW AT*.

As previously noted, all seasons of *TRHW* franchise prior to this were comprised of an all-White cast. Bravo producers made the choice to ignore racial diversity in the first two installments of *TRHW*. Then, in the third geographic

location, they chose to present a cast comprised of five women – four women who exhibited visual markers and/or identified as African American and one White woman. The convergences/divergences amongst *TRHW OC* and *TRHW NY* on the one hand, and *TRHW AT* on the other, can tell us important things about how Bravo sought to represent African American women in the third installment of *TRHW* franchise.

As with the previous two installments, conspicuous consumption and lifestyle affluence played a notable role in *TRHW AT*. Yet there was an important difference in how conspicuous consumption and lifestyle affluence were represented. In particular, the way *TRHW AT* cast dressed, their approach to spending money, and their social etiquette were situated as garish and in bad taste. For example, *The Daily News* characterized the clothes on *TRHW AT* as “prom gowns in bright colors on grown women” (Kinon, 2008, p. 16). In contrast, *TRHW OC* clothing consisted of was slinky material that let the audience see the work of plastic surgeons, while *TRHW NY* included lots of black and lots of fur (Kinon, 2008). Bright colored prom gowns are one example of how *TRHW AT* cast was generally situated as lacking in the appropriate fashion etiquette.

A more specific example can be seen in the fashion attire and wardrobe change location selected by Kim Zolciak. In one episode, Zolciak had a plaid Catholic schoolgirl skirt and shimmering silver tube top in her car, and the reality star pulled into a gas station to make a wardrobe change on her way to a posh high-society party. Since Zolciak believed changing in the bathroom was not classy she opted to have the gas attendant hold up a sheet as she changed in front of her

car door (Hinckley, 2008b; Huguenin, 2008). Zolciak's attire and the location of her wardrobe change speak to the garish taste and tawdry manners producers sought to convey in *TRHWAT*. Unfortunately, this played up racialized and classed stereotypes that demeaned the cast.

Kim Zolciak was the one White cast member. Still, the shapely blonde described herself as "a black woman trapped in a White woman's body" (Hinckley, 2008b; Stanley, 2008C, p. 1). Accordingly, Zolciak purportedly identified as African American. Of course her personal identification does not change the White privilege she is afforded based on the color of her skin. Still when we assess how Zolciak was represented, we find reliance on problematic stereotypes tied to race, class, and gender. In fact, Zolciak was a divorced mother who had a sugar daddy. When the reality star wanted to acquire a \$68,000 Cadillac Escalade, she contacted "Big Papa," her wealthy and anonymous boyfriend (Hinckley, 2008b; Huguenin, 2008; Kinon, 2008; Stanley, 2008c). In alignment with the materialistic jezebel/greedy gold digger trope identified by media scholar Susan Douglas (2010), Bravo producers used racial stereotypes linked to class and sexuality to present Zolciak as unable to live an "appropriate" affluent lifestyle because she identified with the Black community.

The representation of African American cast member Sheree Whitfield also had racist and misogynistic elements. Whitfield was situated as a showy and materialistic African American woman who lacked refinement. A case in point is Whitfield's lavish birthday party, which featured a cake designed to look like a Louis Vuitton handbag (Hinckley, 2008b; Stanley, 2008c). Moreover, her multiple

reminders to viewers that all she wanted at the end of her long divorce was a seven figure lump sum (Huguenin, 2008) supported her portrayal as a greedy gold digger interested in a cash payout that would allow her to live her life as materialistic jezebel (Douglas, 2010). In the first season of *TRHW AT*, the cast engaged in conspicuous consumption and lived affluent lifestyles. Yet, they were portrayed as lacking in taste, refinement, and appropriate social etiquette. Simultaneously, gender role stereotypes in the newest installment aligned with problematic presumptions regarding the difference between “trashy,” “sexy,” and “classy” fashion choices.

Finally, there were new aspects of character dysfunction in *TRHW AT* that speak to how African American women are caricatured in the mainstream media. First, the entire cast for *TRHW AT* was represented as a group of queen bees vying for control. These women snapped their fingers, strutted their stuff, and freely spoke up (Hinckley, 2008b). The drama on *TRHW AT* was purportedly driven by cast member NeNe Leake’s tendency to talk trash about all of her cast mates (Kinon, 2008). Yet the cast was not just situated as a group of overbearing divas that spoke their mind. Instead, a more disturbing level of character dysfunction was evoked. These women were situated as a more compelling source of trouble than their predecessors (Huguenin, 2008). Part of the reason for this was their propensity for physical violence. The “angry black woman” is unfortunately a common stereotype in reality television. From current VH1 reality shows like *Love & Hip Hop* and *Basketball Wives* on VH1 (Abrams, 2012), to specific cast members on *The Real World* (Coral, Season 10) and *The Apprentice* (Omarosa, Season 1), “the

evil sista of reality television” pulls in ratings through physical and verbal confrontation (Wiltz, 2004, p. 1).

Bravo exploited the angry black woman stereotype by foregrounding verbal and physical altercations. Most notably, in the first season of *TRHW AT*, Lisa, Shree, and Kim are all situated as out-of-control women willing to engage in catfights. From physical altercations (e.g. Kim slapping NeNe and Sheree yanking off Kim’s wig) to verbal provocations (e.g. Kim attempting to initiate a fistfight with her party planner and Lisa verbally threatening Kim), *TRHW AT* stood out due to the confrontations and catfights (Hinckley, 2008b; Huguenin, 2008; Stanley, 2008b; Yourse, 2008a).

The angry black woman trope most likely helped garner a good portion of the 2.21 million viewers who tuned in for the November 18 season finale. At the end of the season, a shattered friendship (between NeNe and Kim), a longstanding lack of civility (Sheree and NeNe), and a much discussed catfight (Lisa and Kim) – which resulted in Kim getting a restraining order against Lisa – made for a compelling reunion show on November 24. The season one reunion for *TRHW AT* generated a great deal of Internet chatter across blogs even before it aired based on the explosive nature of the finale (Yourse, 2008a). Then, when the reunion aired, it pulled in 2.8 million viewers, 2.1 million of whom came from the valuable 18-49 adult demographic. Moreover, it was the first time that a Bravo docudrama acquired over two million viewers amongst adults 18-49 (Yourse, 2008b). Unfortunately, as the seasons progressed *TRHW AT* continued to be a ratings goldmine that capitalized on nouveau riche gendered wealth grounded in

problematic stereotypes tied to what it means to be a wealthy Black women in America. In fact, recent cultural critique focuses on how African American women are caricatured in the provocative show, and the role this plays in perpetuating problematic stereotypes of Black women (Abrams, 2012; Cox, 2012; Samuels, 2011, 2012; and Sission, 2012).

Interestingly, *TRHW AT* cast was based in a major metropolitan city known for a wealthy and well-organized African American community. In *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*, prominent author and race/class advocate Lawrence Otis Graham (1999) situates Atlanta as a city known for an African American population with strong ties to business, politics, and academia (Sission, 2012). Yet Bravo's representation of Atlanta "housewives" shows no signs of a wealthy African American community driven by academia, business, and politics (Sission, 2012). The Atlanta cast is not represented as a group of classy and refined career women interested in private schools, summer homes, making appropriate donations, and attending the right social events. Bravo producers move beyond the sexist representation of the previous two tropes – the vain trophy wife and the pretentious career woman driven by social status – to foreground the angry black women, the materialistic jezebel, and the greedy gold digger (Douglas, 2010).

The sexist, racist, and classist elements of *TRHW AT* were readily exploited when Ramona Singer and Jill Zarin offered their thoughts on the premier season of *TRHW AT*. Ramona Singer – a New York cast member with two dogs (named Aston and Martin) and a car to match (Hinckley, 2008a) – noted that the crass

materialism in the first season of *TRHW AT* was horrendous (Huguenin, 2009a). Jill Zarin referred to the Atlanta cast as a combination of female socialites and the *Bad Girls Club* (a show on the Oxygen cable network), and she argued that this combination created a “twisted-bad-girls with cash” version of *TRHW* (Huguenin, 2009a). The comments made by Singer and Zarin reinforce a problematic distinction between “appropriate” and “inappropriate” wealth. In this instance the nouveau riche wealth in *TRHW NY* is situated as appropriate, whereas the nouveau riche wealth in *TRHW AT* is situated as inappropriate. In reality, all the women in the three installments discussed lived affluent lives guided by conspicuous consumption and crass materialism. Sadly, White privilege grounded in gender, class, and racial stereotypes situated *TRHW NY* cast as superior to the *TRHW AT* cast in their taste for commodities, display of wealth, demeanor, social etiquette, monetary acquisition, and self-control. *TRHW Atlanta* cast, and to a lesser degree *TRHW OC* cast, were situated as “the other,” while the nouveau riche gendered wealth in *TRHW NY* was given more inherent value in the paratexts surrounding the franchise. In the next section we turn to the role ethnicity and class played in the articulation of nouveau riche gendered wealth.

### **Nouveau Riche Gendered Wealth in New Jersey**

The fourth installment of *TRHW* franchise, *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* (*TRHW NJ*), previewed in April 2009 and premiered the following month. *TRHW NJ* introduced America to Caroline Manzo, Dina Manzo, Teresa Giudice, Danielle Staub, and Jacqueline Laurita. From the link to organized crime (Buettner,



2009; McShane, 2009; Stanley, 2009)<sup>132</sup> and the tough-talking alpha housewife who wanted her children to skip college and go into the family business, to the attention to family devotion, big hair, and tanning, *TRHW NJ* capitalized on stereotypes tied to the demeanor, etiquette, taste, spending habits, and monetary acquisition of Italian American women (Givhan, 2009). Here I examine the role ethnic Whiteness played in the embodiment of nouveau riche gendered wealth in *THRWNJ*.

Following in the footsteps of *TRHW AT*, *TRHW NJ* cast were situated as vulgar and tactless via the stereotype of the Italian American Jersey Girl. In fact, conspicuous consumption and lifestyle affluence reached new heights in the series premiere when housewife Teresa Giudice paid \$120,360 for one room of French-chateau furniture with a pile of hundred dollar bills (Clifford, 2009; Hinckley, 2009a; Stanley, 2009). Giudice justified her purchase and payment method with the statement, “I hear the economy’s crashing, so that’s why I pay cash” (Clifford, 2009, p. 1). Giudice’s 12,000-square-foot, marble, granite, and onyx dream home was a space of aesthetic and financial excess (Green, 2009; Kinon, 2009). Like the other cast members, Teresa Giudice lived in an opulent and over-decorated home that resembled a banquet hall. From sprawling houses with gilded interiors (e.g. granite countertops, chandelier lifts, double-height foyers, and butterfly stair cases), to expensive vehicles, jewelry, and furniture, *TRHW NJ* inundated viewers

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<sup>132</sup> Dina and Caroline – sisters that comprised two of the five housewives – were married to Albert and Tommy Manzo. Their father, Albert (Tiny) Manzo, was purportedly executed by the mob in 1983 when he was suspected of skimming money. The mob style execution – Tiny Manzo a 350-pound mobster was found naked, with his legs and arms bound in plastic, stuffed into the trunk of his car with four shots to his torso – was never solved (McShane, 2009).

with the lifestyle affluence of brash, self-indulgent Italian American Jersey Girls (Clifford, 2009; Givhan, 2009; Green, 2009; Kinon, 2009).

*TRHW NJ* cast was also represented as being overbearing and uncouth. For example, a clip of Caroline Manzo as the overbearing matriarch – stating “If you’re gonna mess with my family, you’re messing with me” – was used in the opening credits for *TRHW NJ*. Similarly, the opening credits situate both Dina Manzo and Danielle Staub as confrontational via the statements “If you think I’m a bitch, then bring it on” (Dina) and “You’re either gonna love me or hate me, there is not an in between with me” (Danielle). In that vein, viewers were prompted through paratexts (e.g. opening credits, previews, and trailers) to view at least three of the cast members for *TRHW NJ* as tough and overbearing women looking for confrontation.

*TRHW NJ* capitalized on Danielle Staub’s self-presentation as a villainous cougar – she lifted weights in a bikini, danced inappropriately with Caroline’s son, carried nude pictures of herself on her cell phone, engaged in phone sex with a guy referred to as “Guccimodel,” bragged about her celebrity hook-ups in her biography; and is disliked by Dina, Caroline and Teresa. Toward the end of the season, the gossiping and rumors came to a head at a dinner with the entire cast. The dinner at Lu Nello, a fancy restaurant in Cedar Grove New Jersey, was notable based on the histrionic antics of the entire cast (Huguenin, 2009b). Two of the emotional outbursts in the season finale were shown in previews and trailers for *TRHW NJ* at various points in the season. Caroline Manzo’s rant – “Let me tell you something about my family. We are as thick as thieves and we protect each other

till the end” – situated her as the Italian matriarch protecting her family, in particular her sister Dina, from Danielle Staub’s accusations. While Teresa Giudice’s melodramatic behavior– bulging eyes, table-flipping, repeated swearing, and the need to be physically restrained in response to being “disrespected” – situated her as a temperamental, aggressive, and out-of-control Italian American woman. In both instances, these clips conformed to cultural stereotypes surrounding the emotional volatility of Italian American women.

Promotions throughout the season built toward the dramatic finale. In fact, the promotional effort to capitalize on tensions amongst the dysfunctional female characters most likely played a major role in ratings success for the final episode of *TRHW NJ*. Together the 10:00 PM airing (3.47 million) and 11:00 PM airing (1.13 million) generated 4.6 million total viewers. Amongst viewers 18-49, the episode pulled in 2.46 million at 10:00 PM and 794,000 at 11:00 PM. Record-breaking season ratings made *TRHW NJ* the most popular installment in June 2009, and the finale was the top-rated program amongst young adults on Tuesday night (Crupi, 2009; Yourse, 2009a).

*TRHW NJ* relied on tropes like the brash self-indulgent Italian American Jersey girl, the villainous cougar, the overbearing Italian matriarch, and the emotionally unstable Italian woman. In fact, the finale was associated with words like “trailer trash theater,” “cheap,” and “low-rent,” while the dinner was described as a table-flipping, curse-laden, snarling, five-way catfight with women in expensive clothing at a fancy restaurant (Crupi, 2009; Hinckley, 2009; Kissell, 2009; and Yourse, 2009a). As with the representation of Atlanta housewives, the

portrayal of New Jersey housewives upped the ante on campy dramedy, this time via White ethnic nouveau riche wealth. In the next section, we turn to *The Real Housewives of D.C.*, the only installment in *TRHW* franchise that has not gone on to have a second season.

### **Political Discourse, Affluent Lifestyle Television, and Ratings**

As we have seen, dysfunctional characters play a notable role in *TRHW AT* and *TRHW NJ*. These two installments also stand out for another reason: ratings. *TRHW AT* broke ratings records by averaging 3.5 million viewers in its third season, while the finale for that season averaged 4.4 million viewers, making it the highest rated episode in *TRHW* franchise's history (Nordyke, 2011). Ratings, content, and audiences are the three commodities produced by the television industry. Ratings have the utmost importance within a digital media landscape driven by cybernetic commodification (Mosco, 2010).

*The Real Housewives of D.C.* (*TRHW DC*), the fifth installment of *TRHW* franchise, is noteworthy for a variety of reasons. First, Michaele Salahi generated a great deal of media coverage prior to being cast on *TRHW DC* when she and her husband crashed a diplomatic event at the White House. Second, the presence of the franchise within America's political hub speaks to the linkages amongst entertainment, lifestyle, and politics. Finally, *TRHW DC* is the only installment in the franchise thus far that was cancelled after one season. Here I examine how these noteworthy aspects are woven together in a complex web that illustrates the role ratings play in the viability of gendered program content. It is important to highlight that paratexts surrounding *TRHW DC* did not evidence the same type of

attention to gender role stereotypes; the affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of rich housewives; and dysfunctional female characters. While these themes were present, they tended to coalesce around Michaela Salahi. In fact, her actions prior to being cast dominated paratexts surrounding *TRHW DC* prior to and following its premier.

*TRHW DC* cast was comprised of one African American woman (Stacie Scott Turner) and four Caucasian women (Mary Schmidt Amons, Catherine Ommanney, Lynda Erkiletian, and Michaela Salahi). The fifth installment of *TRHW* franchise speaks to how Bravo producers delved into politics in a creative way that allowed them to highlight the engaging, dramatic, pleasurable, and unpredictable nature of Washington D.C. (Jones, 2005). In part, *TRHW DC* came about because Bravo sought to tap into the cultural energy surrounding the election of Barack Obama. When *TRHW DC* was announced in May 2009 Andy Cohen (Bravo senior vice president of original programming) noted how the cultural climate was right because there was “a young hot couple in the White house, and along with that comes a lot of interest in the place they’re living and the restaurants they’re eating in” (De Moraes, 2009b, p. 1). According to Cohen, the Obamas ratcheted up the D.C. image and made Washington a place of interest for *US* magazine. Cohen situated Michelle Obama as a “bull’s-eye new Real Housewife of America” (De Moraes, 2009b, p. 1). As can be seen, there was attention to the allure of beauty, power, image, and lifestyle practices (e.g. where people live and eat) in paratexts that preceded the show’s release.

Still, political discourse was on the agenda for *TRHW DC*. Up until this point, *TRHW* had not attended to political discourse according to Cohen, and *TRHW DC* marked Bravo's first effort to incorporate political discourse into the popular franchise by casting "real" D.C. housewives (De Moraes, 2009b). Yet Bravo faced challenges in getting participation from politicians and/or partners of politicians (Argetsinger, 2009). Initially, Half Yard – the production company that produced *TRHW DC* – purportedly sought to create a documentary about power players in Washington. Producer Abby Greensfelder's marriage to Franklin Foer (editor of *New Republic*) offered access to important political circles, as did the in roads Half Yard made with GOP lobbyist Juleanna Glover (Argetsinger, 2009).

At this stage, Half Yard had no connection to Bravo and the presumption was that Half Yard was producing a documentary called *Inside Washington*. The D.C.-based production company was scouting and filming for a full year before Bravo announced that Half Yard would produce *TRHW DC* in May 2009. During this time, Susanna Quinn (wife of Jack Quinn a super-lobbyist who served as White House counsel under President Clinton) was a prospective cast member who had an appropriate political pedigree and who was involved in filming sessions with Half Yard. When Quinn learned that the filming she participated in was for *TRHW DC*, she immediately stopped her involvement with the project (Argetsinger, 2009). Similarly, two women involved in the Republican Party were also under consideration to be cast in *TRHW DC*. Edwina Rogers a Republican lobbyist and Lisa Spies a Republican fundraiser reportedly spent a significant amount of time with Bravo producers. In the end these two D.C. insiders were not cast. Carol Joynt

a writer who covers Washington D.C. for the Web site New York Social Diary, commented on Bravo's inability to cast D.C. insiders for the newest installment of *TRHW* franchise. The journalist – a plugged-in Georgetown insider, according to *The Washington Post* – situated the unwillingness of Washington insiders to participate in *TRHW DC* as Bravo's "dirty secret" (Argetsinger, 2009). The atmosphere of discretion in Washington D.C. was noted as the primary reason why Half Yard was unable to cast "real" housewives (e.g. politicians and/or partners of politicians who worked in Washington)(Argetsinger, 2009).

Given that Washington insiders refused to participate, Bravo sought out cultural connoisseurs, philanthropic leaders, and fashion sophisticates who moved amongst D.C.'s elite social and political circles (De Moraes, 2009b; Yourse, 2009b, Salamone, 2009). Ultimately the five women cast for *TRHW DC* were unknowns, and Bravo attempted to create notoriety for some of these women even before they were officially cast. For example, in September 2009 *The Washingtonian* put two prospective participants on their best-dressed list – Lynda Erkiletian (cast member) and Rich Amons (husband of cast member Mary Amons) – and threw a party that was filmed by Bravo. Additionally, in October 2009 prospective D.C. cast member Michaela Salahi and reality star Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth "co-hosted a birthday party at The Park for local TV personality Paul Wharton – a high-cheekboned stylist on the club and cocktail scene said to have a supporting role" in *TRHW DC* (Argetsinger, 2009, p. 1).

Of course, prospective cast member Michaela Salahi is best known for her and her husband's uninvited presence at a White House state dinner in November

2009. Any American who watched television or read the newspaper in the weeks following this incident were most likely introduced to *TRHW*, assuming they did not already know about the popular franchise. Prior to Michael's unrequested attendance at the White House state dinner, the *TRHW* franchise was a ubiquitous cultural artifact. This incident further solidified the omnipresence of this licensing and merchandising behemoth in American popular culture. Ultimately, despite the incident – or maybe because of the incident – Michael Salahi was selected as a cast member for *TRHW DC*. Bravo's decision to air footage of the party-crashing during the first season of *TRHW DC* suggests the cable network sought to exploit the publicity goldmine in the hopes that it would drive up ratings.

The fame-seeking antics of Michael Salahi aligned well with Bravo's programming ethos. As a cable network driven by food, beauty, design, fashion, and popular culture, Bravo was known for reality characters viewers could laugh at due to their lack of self-awareness (Dominus, 2008). Still, there was a possibility that viewers could be turned off by Michael's hubris and aggressive self-branding. Bravo was aware of this, and the cable network took action to assess the situation when it commissioned a survey of viewer perceptions surrounding the White House incident. According to *The New York Times*, Bravo attempted to assess at least two things in the study the cable network conducted a few weeks after the incident (Stelter, 2010). First, Bravo sought to assess how the public would respond to the casting of Michael in *TRHW DC*. For example, if Bravo cast Michael, would viewers think this couple was being rewarded for their actions? Second, Bravo sought to assess the level of public interest for the now infamous



woman. More aptly, did viewers want to see more of Michaela Salahi? Bravo did not make the results of the study public (Stelter, 2010). Still, the decision to include Michaela in the show, and to air the footage of the White House party-crashing, suggests that viewers wanted to see more of this dysfunctional female persona, and either did not think Bravo was rewarding her behavior, or did not care if that was the case.

Proximity to power was the main thrust of *TRHW DC* (Stelter, 2009),<sup>133</sup> and the White House incident obviously shows the lengths Michaela was willing to go to get close to political power. Bravo definitely attempted to exploit Michaela Salahi's status as a dysfunctional woman seeking the spotlight. In the first episode, she was situated as an overeager arriviste by other cast members (Stanley, 2010). Michaela further solidified her status as a dysfunctional female character in the second episode of the season when she and her husband got a police escort to a D.C. nightclub. The incident evoked controversy and generated media coverage since D.C. police officers are not allowed to escort ordinary citizens to parties. According to Gwendolyn Crump, a D.C. police spokesperson who made a statement the day after the episode aired, "The Metropolitan Police Department was not involved in any official escort of the Salahis" (Farhi & Argetsinger, 2010, p. 5). Crump noted that the appearance of a 3<sup>rd</sup> district cruiser escorting a white stretch limo to The Park at Fourteenth in the second episode of *THRW DC* was being

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<sup>133</sup> Politicians are not present on screen. Still, naming dropping was a common occurrence. For example, in the series premier Catherine Ommanney complained that President Obama did not R.S.V.P. to her wedding and did not attend the photographer of the year awards ceremony honoring her husband. Mary Amons noted that she lived near Colin Powell and Dick Cheney, and she played with Robert and Ethel Kennedy's children when she was growing-up (Stanley, 2010).

investigated (Farhi & Argetsinger, 2010). Then in September, a month after the premier of *TRHW DC*, Michaele Salahi made a startling announcement while being interviewed on *Fox and Friends*. Michaele's acknowledgement that she had multiple sclerosis was situated as a public relations blow to cast members who had expressed their dislike of Michaele, chided her for having an eating disorder, and endlessly rolled their eyes based on the things Michael said and did (De Moraes, 2010a).

Despite Michaele Salahi's drama, there was a problem with the newest installment of *TRHW*: it was too dignified and quiet, or in the words of Andy Cohen, it was less noisy than its predecessors (De Moraes, 2010b). *TRHW DC* did not have the *Knots Landing* vibe – blonde hair, big boobs, and attention to alcohol – of *TRHW OC*. The “level of discourse” was different. It was more serious and more attuned to politics, according to Cohen (De Moraes, 2010b). Cohen added, some viewers expected table-flipping (*TRHW NJ*) and weave-pulling (*TRHW AT*), and “that was never going to happen” on *TRHW DC* (De Moraes, 2010b, p. 2). The signs of cancellation were vivid in October when Cohen spoke to *Washington Post* journalist Lisa De Moraes (2010b). Still, *TRHW DC* was not officially cancelled until April 2011 (De Moraes, 2011).

Interestingly, the series premier of *TRHW DC* (1.6 million viewers) performed much better than the series premier of *TRHW NY* (824,000 viewers), according to *The Hollywood Reporter* (Hibberd, 2010). Despite this tepid start, *TRHW NY* has aired five seasons since its March 2008 premier. In contrast, *TRHW DC* was cancelled after its first season. If we look at the ratings for the premier

seasons of these two series we find a viable indicator of why *TRHW DC* was cancelled. *TRHW DC*<sup>134</sup> averaged approximately 160,000 fewer viewers in the 18-49 demographic than *TRHW NY*.<sup>135</sup> Ironically, the season average for overall viewers for *TRHW DC* (1.4 million) was higher than *TRHW NY* (1.2 million) (Bravo Ratings, 2012a & 2012b). Still this did not matter, as *TRHW DC* could not compete in the key advertising demographic. In fact, if we compare the average in the 18-49 demographic for the first season of *TRHW* franchise in New Jersey (1.28 million viewers), Atlanta (990,000 viewers), and Washington D.C. (670,000 viewers), we find even larger gaps between *TRHW DC* and its geographic predecessors (Bravo Ratings, 2012b, 2012c, & 2012a). Overall, the *TRHW DC* was the oldest-skewing installment in the franchise. The median age of viewers for *TRHW DC* was 40. In contrast, the median age for the first season of *TRHW AT* was 34 (De Moraes, 2010b).

The fifth installment of *TRHW* franchise arose in the media frenzy surrounding Michael Salahi's White House party-crashing. The publicity surrounding this incident potentially offered ratings nirvana. Yet Bravo was not pleased with this installment's performance in the coveted 18-49 demographic. Bravo's decision to cancel *TRHW DC* tells us about the value placed on audience rating. Moreover, this specific installment delved into political discourse for the first time in the franchise's history. In that vein, the cancelation of *TRHW DC*

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<sup>134</sup> *TRHW D.C.* season one averaged approximately 670,000 viewers in the 18-49 demographic (Bravo Ratings, 2012a).

<sup>135</sup> *TRHW NY* season one averaged approximately 832,000 viewers in the 18-49 demographic (Bravo Ratings, 2012b).

indicates that a gendered cable network driven by nouveau riche consumer citizenship did not believe there was space for even minimal political discourse.

Pre-show publicity coverage of *TRHW DC* offers insight into the role campy dramedy played in limiting the potential for political discourse in this gendered content. In June 2010, two months prior to *TRHW DC*'s release, pre-show publicity highlighted how *TRHW DC* cast was connected to Washington power brokers. Bravo senior vice president Andy Cohen noted the dynamics between access to political power and social status in *TRHW DC* ("Willy wonky," 2010). At this point in time, Cohen attempted to capitalize on the entertaining nature of politics by playing up the incredibly juicy political fights in the first episode (Jones, 2005). Yet there was speculation regarding how Washington politics would fit into *TRHW DC*. And Cohen's enthusiasm for *TRHW DC* was compared to the misguided passion MTV executives had when the *Real World: DC* was released in December 2009.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, *The Washington Post* noted that when *TRHW DC* is released in August, we will find out if "the capital of the free world" and a franchise known for theatrical antics that pull in ratings (e.g. table-flipping, catfights, and conspicuous consumption) are mutually exclusive ("Willy wonky," 2010, p. 1). In that vein, prior to the release of *TRHW DC*, the space of government politics was situated as antithetical to the interests of viewers of *The Real World* and most likely mutually exclusive to viewers of *TRHW* franchise.

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<sup>136</sup> The *Real World: D.C.* purportedly flopped because viewers interested in a show like *Real World* want alcohol poisoning that leads to a dramatic trip to the ER and steamy hot-tub sex, and this type of viewer "flees in horror" from a show based in the nation's capital ("Willy wonky," 2010).

My discussion of *TRHW DC* suggests that an affluent lifestyle series surrounded by a firestorm of free public relations did not generate enough of the right audience – as determined by networks and advertisers – to warrant a second season on the Bravo cable network. Beyond ratings, the reason why this installment of *TRHW* franchise failed can be attributed to things like: political discourse that poorly aligned with the table-flipping (*TRHW NJ*) and weave-pulling (*TRHW AT*) viewers are interested in, and a misguided passion amongst television executives that viewers seek anything more than catfights and conspicuous consumption (De Moraes, 2010b; “Willy wonky,” 2010; De Moraes, 2011). These presumptions are problematic, as they situate the space of government politics as antithetical to the interests of the gendered viewers who consume Bravo’s program content.

*TRHW DC* stood out from its predecessors based on the limited attention to the three aspects of campy dramedy across the entire cast for the show. Instead, the paratexts surrounding the show primarily illustrated how Michaele Salahi embodied the three themes found in *TRHW* franchise: gender role stereotypes; the affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of rich housewives; and dysfunctional female characters. First, Michaele’s physical attributes aligned well with the appearance of “desirable” women (e.g. blonde, thin, fashionable, and large breasts) in American culture. In fact, the reality star’s thin frame led cast members to suspect that she had an eating disorder (De Moraes, 2010a). Second, her interest in affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption was evident prior to her official casting in *TRHW DC*, based on her desire to interact with societal elites who span

politics, business, and entertainment, and her effort to publicize her presence at the White House state dinner with her celebrity-driven Facebook page (Cooper & Stelter, 2009a). This was reinforced early on in the premier season via efforts to situate her as an overeager arriviste in the first episode (Stanley, 2010) and her use of a police escort to a D.C. nightclub in the second episode (Farhi & Argetsinger, 2010). Finally, Michaele Salahi stood out as a dysfunctional female who engaged in theatrical antics. Ultimately, her actions turned her into a marketable commodity with significant exchange value in the digital media landscape. Most notably, her effort to crash the White House state dinner was an aggressive, illegal, and theatrical act that led to her being cast in *TRHW DC*.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen throughout this chapter, *TRHW* is a transmedia franchise driven by brand management and brand expansion. The nouveau riche gendered wealth articulated in this meme relies on branded entertainment grounded in gender role stereotypes; the affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of “American housewives; and dysfunctional female characters. The first theme, gender role stereotypes spans physical appearance and professional endeavors. Broadly speaking, gender role stereotypes tied to physical appearance aligned with problematic presumptions regarding the difference between “trashy,” “sexy,” and “classy” fashion choices. While class was used as a marker of taste, heteronormative femininity grounded in fashion, beauty, and design was of the utmost importance in the lives of all the housewives. Gender role stereotypes in the professional realm either disregarded the role work played in the lives of the

cast or privileged female-oriented careers. The attention to gendered careers grounded in food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture is concerning for at least two reasons: (1) it further substantiates the role domesticity should play in the day-to-day lives of women and (2) it serves as an important factor in the brand management and brand expansion surrounding this transmedia franchise.

The second theme, lifestyle affluence and conspicuous consumption, evidenced important differences. For example, paratextual discourse surrounding New York and D.C. suggested that these two casts embodied the most “appropriate” vision of capitalist wealth.<sup>137</sup> On the one hand, paratexts surrounding *TRHW NY* highlighted the cast’s affinity for a type of image and status that is commonly linked to bourgeois wealth. On the other hand, coverage of *TRHW DC* suggests the show was canceled because it lacked the table-flipping, catfights, and weave-pulling found in *TRHW AT* and *TRHW NJ* (De Moraes, 2010b; “Willy wonky,” 2010; De Moraes, 2011).

Similarly, the final theme, dysfunctional female characters, relied upon racial and ethnic stereotypes to situate the Atlanta cast the New Jersey cast as inferior. Character dysfunction in *TRHW AT* and *TRHW NJ* spanned tropes like the angry black woman, the emotional Italian woman, and the villainous cougar. The casts for these two installments offered the most negative portrayals of nouveau rich gendered wealth. Given the historical factors tied to social, economic, and political inequality of African American women it seems more prudent to attend to *TRHW AT*. In particular, we are offered very few representations of Black women

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<sup>137</sup> There was also evidence of this type of bourgeois wealth in paratexts surrounding *TRHW D.C.* Still,

on television. When we turn to African American female wealth the scope of representations becomes even smaller.<sup>138</sup> Within this mediated context, *TRHW AT* cast is more likely to be seen as representative of African American wealth.

Ultimately, the intersecting tensions amongst gender, race, and class in American culture, combined with the limited and flawed representations of Black women in mainstream media, heighten the stakes of *TRHW AT*.

Ultimately, *TRHW's* use of irony as an aesthetic commodity serves as an effective way to navigate capitalist patriarchy. As I have argued previously, the hermeneutic movement between literal and ironic meaning (Hutcheon, 1994) establishes irony's value as an aesthetic commodity. This space of ambivalence allows for: (1) stereotypical gender/sex role portrayals to be laughed at, even as gendered consumer practices that align with hyper-sexuality are literally or figuratively sold; (2) affluent lifestyle and conspicuous consumption to be mocked, even as a less pronounced self-pleasing consumer lifestyle is literally or figuratively sold; and (3) dysfunctional female characters to be judged for their narcissism, self-preservation, and aggression, even as a market-based ethos grounded in appearance, image, and self-branding is being advocated.

We live in a society that glorifies image, appearance, and branding. Premium value is put into turning a product, service, idea, and/or person into a marketable commodity with significant exchange value. The branding and commodification of irony – in *THRW*, at Bravo, and, across affluent lifestyle

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<sup>138</sup> In contrast, quantitatively there are more representations of Caucasian females and qualitatively they are more varied. Representations of Italian American women may also be limited. Still, in American society there is a long history of race relations plagued by vast social, political, and economic inequalities.



entertainment – gives life to postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship. Overall, the articulation of gendered nouveau riche wealth in paratexts surrounding *TRHW* franchise showed small but significant differences that illustrate the intertwined nature of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality in contemporary American culture. The various embodiments highlight the role taste plays in a neoliberal culture driven by capital accumulation and consumer choice. In the end, the postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship articulated in this franchise relies on problematic presumptions regarding the types of women that deserve and can appropriately handle money.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION: THE MULTI-SCREEN VIEWER IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

In 2011, when Comcast purchased a 51% stake in NBC Universal from General Electric, it seemed as if Bravo's thirty-year path toward broadcast/cable convergence had culminated. It seemed that way, but there was one final step in the process: Comcast's full ownership of NBC Universal. In February 2013 *The Wall Street Journal* announced that Comcast would be purchasing General Electric's remaining 49% stake in NBC Universal (Peers & Linebaugh, 2013). The 16.7 billion dollar transaction was situated as the largest media acquisition in the past five years (Peers, 2013). Brian Roberts, the Comcast CEO responsible for the deal, commented on the cable behemoth's business strategy over twenty years. Initially, Comcast sought increased distribution. Then, according to Roberts, as the company noticed how "content gained value with new technologies, the company decided to diversify" (Peers, 2013, p. 3).

As a cable network owned by Comcast, Bravo is one component in NBC Universal's diversified entertainment portfolio. The iconic presence of Bravo's signature programming in twenty-first century popular culture; Bravo's industry status as a consumer haven driven by irony and conspicuous lifestyle; and Bravo's synergistic multiplatform approach to television are three interwoven realms that are representative of the role branding, commodification, and digital convergence play in the viability of cable brands, broadcast brands, and – ultimately – diversified, transnational media conglomerates.

In 2013 research at [affluencers.com](http://affluencers.com) highlighted the new role of the multi-screen viewer. This business-to-business marketing effort, which Bravo uses to sell the network, its content, and its audience to potential advertisers, situated multi-screen as “the ultimate screen” in a digital media landscape faced with changes in how television viewers consume content. The excerpt explaining the research is worth quoting at length:

Bravo partnered with Latitude research to deconstruct the multi-screen viewer with large-scale quantitative and qualitative studies. Our exclusive research provides insights on how marketers can recoup lost DVR audiences and engage distracted TV viewers. Additionally, take a look at newly featured partnership opportunities that help brands build connections with consumers as they go from screen to screen. ([Affluencer.com](http://Affluencer.com), 2013, n.p.)

In the excerpt above, the multi-screen viewer<sup>139</sup> is situated as means to recoup audience members who skip commercials, based on the research conducted by Bravo and Latitude Media.<sup>140</sup> Findings from Bravo and Latitude Media research highlighted the “ad-friendly” context that dual screen viewing purportedly occurred in,<sup>141</sup> and suggested that the presence of more than one screen meant

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<sup>139</sup> The multi-screen viewer is defined as “people who use second screens (one or more) at least occasionally while watching TV” ([affluencer.com](http://affluencer.com), 2013, n.p.).

<sup>140</sup> According to [affluence.com](http://affluence.com) the two entities conducted qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research included 112 participants that watched content in Boston and LA in July and August of 2012. The participants filled out a pre-survey, and then engaged in viewing sessions in a lab in LA or Boston. Following the viewing session participants completed a post-survey. There were three groups: (1) dual-screen viewers watching live programming; (2) dual-screen viewers watching programming recorded on a DVR; (3) and tri-screen viewers watching programming recorded on a DVR. An online survey regarding the motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of multi-screen viewers (between the ages of 18-54) was used for the quantitative research. This component included 1,048 multi-screen viewers that completed the online survey in August 2012 ([affluencer.com](http://affluencer.com), 2013).

<sup>141</sup> The research highlighted the “ad-friendly” nature of second screen viewing time by comparing how viewers used their second screen during the program and during the commercials. Activities included: text/instant messaging; viewing a website; using an application; Facebook; email; Twitter; doing work; and other ([affluencer.com](http://affluencer.com), 2013).

viewers were less likely to skip advertisements.<sup>142</sup> Moreover, Bravo touted that 21% of dual screen viewers looked up Bravo and/or its program content during their second screen time.

All these claims have important significance in a digital media landscape driven by convergence, commodification, and branding. The reciprocal relations amongst these processes can be seen in three ways. First, dual screen moves the viewer beyond the traditional television screen, and this type of multiplatform convergence allows Bravo to collect information that it can use to package, market, and sell its valuable cybernetic commodity. Second, the dynamics between convergence and commodification have an added benefit given that second screen time purportedly addresses concerns amongst industry executives regarding the willingness of viewers to skip commercials. Third, multi-screen users engage in an array of activities that are very valuable for brand management and brand extension. Before the show, multi-screen users can connect with other viewers or get to know characters on the show. During the show, they can interact with content in real time, as it is being aired. Finally after the show, they can engage bonus content, seek out details about upcoming episodes, and purchase products linked with the show (affluencer.com, 2013).

Bravo's attention to and interest in multi-screen viewers makes sense given the immense political economic value of cross platform viewing. This relatively new viewing practice allows Bravo to sell its audience commodity across multiple

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<sup>142</sup> In particular, "73% of all participants agree that 'having other devices with me while I watch TV shows makes me less likely to fast-forward through ads'" (affleuncer.com, 2013, no page).

platforms, and it allows Bravo to manage and extend its brand via the productive work of its avid fans. Moreover, Bravo's ubiquitous and seamlessly integrated presence as a well-branded cable network that redistributes content at little additional cost across multiple technological platforms aligns with shifts in the cultural, political economic, and technological processes that constitute the digital media landscape. In fact, Dan Schiller (2000) argues that diversified entertainment conglomerates involved in content production and distribution benefit greatly from the ability to stabilize and concentrate interactions amongst audience members and program content. In that vein, Bravo's attention to, marketing of, and reliance on the multi-screen viewer is emblematic of the role convergence, cybernetic commodification, and brand management play for media entities in the twenty-first century digital media landscape.

Moreover, my case analysis illustrates how the boundaries amongst convergence, commodification, and branding have blurred in a postnetwork environment characterized by "rapid transformation and rethinking, both within the advertising, marketing, and media industries, and in the minds of scholars who describe, analyze, and critique these cultural forms" (West & McAllister, 2013, p. 1). In this chapter, I conclude my dissertation by noting the limitations of my findings, commenting on the contributions my dissertation makes to current scholarly research, and highlighting the implications my findings have for consumption and citizenship in contemporary American culture.

All research comes with limitations. In this instance, three things stand out to me. First, I had to put time constraints on my dissertation. Primarily, I focused

on a thirty-year time span from 1980-2010. I did seek out additional data post 2010 (e.g. information from [affluencer.com](http://affluencer.com) and print sources surrounding Comcast's partial and then full acquisition of NBC Universal). My decision to limit my historical archive to three decades was not arbitrary. Instead, my decision to end in 2010 was guided by my desire to show Bravo's rapid transformation over three decades that spanned network and postnetwork television. Still, the time parameters are a limitation, and future research could expand upon my representation of the role that branding, commodification, and convergence play in the constitution of Bravo specifically, and the digital media landscape writ large.

Second, I lacked direct access to industry professionals in my dissertation research. I did acquire resources produced by industry executives from television, advertising, and marketing. Still, the lack of direct access to industry executives and/or industry events is a limitation. Research is an ongoing process, and as I expand as a scholar I plan to develop relationships that will allow me to directly engage the people who produce and consume media content. This brings me to my final limitation, the absence of audience research. Initially, I planned to engage in audience research via Internet websites for *The Real Housewives* and *Project Runway*. Time constraints were part of the reason I needed to put off audience research. Another reason was my desire to understand the broad discursive and material context that guides how the general public understands and experiences Bravo. In that vein, the absence of audience research would be a limitation if I were interested in how avid fans engaged Bravo. Conversely, the absence of audience research makes sense given my interest in Bravo's broad cultural resonance.

Overall, my interest in the popular culture ethos that surrounds Bravo has allowed me to support and build upon scholarly research in the political economy of communication (both macro level political economic analysis and micro level production studies), media/cultural studies, and feminist studies. Through a review of my findings, I trace how my research contributes to and expands upon scholarly work in these realms.

### **From Network to Postnetwork Television**

Bravo's path over three decades traces how a technology, initially used to extend the spatial reach of broadcast television gave rise to a digital media landscape oriented toward niche interests and mass customization across multiple interconnected media platforms. Branding, convergence, and commodification are three themes interwoven throughout my findings. What is most evident is how the scope and depth of these entities evolved over time. Accordingly, I use the discussion of my finding to trace their trajectory during three decades that span network and postnetwork television.

### **The Beginning of Bravo, and the End of the Network Era**

In the 1980s, cable technology was offered as a democratic alternative to the perils of mass broadcasting. Unfortunately, the most vivid finding from this decade was the lack of alignment between the promise and the reality. Cable technology did not provide cultural democracy. Instead, cable technology supported the iteration of a bourgeois consumer citizenship grounded in taste, privatization, and self-governance. My findings illuminate how Bravo's brand identity was grounded in a liberal elite bourgeois distinction between lowbrow

and highbrow entertainment content. While this type of binary distinction was a well-known practice in the 1980s, I give visibility to the new role technology played in the articulation of class distinction.

This is readily apparent in cultural discourse surrounding Bravo and PBS, two cultural arts networks with vastly different political economic models. My findings illustrate how the political economic significance of Bravo's status as a fee-based premium cable network on the one hand, and PBS's status as a universally accessible broadcast network on the other, was patently ignored in periodical coverage. Both networks were valued for their airing of highbrow arts programming. Still, market-based access to specialized technology allowed Bravo to surpass PBS as an outlet for highbrow arts programming. Taste and class distinction moved beyond program content to include access to specialized technology. In this context, Bravo offered a route to good citizenship for responsible bourgeois consumer citizens attuned to self-governance via their taste for the cultural arts and their ability/willingness to pay for access to this niche content.

This new articulation of bourgeois consumer citizenship is important for at least three reasons. First, the presence of an economic barrier, for content deemed to have important cultural value, is antithetical to democratic ideals. Second, this articulation of bourgeois consumer citizenship used a highbrow/lowbrow binary that misleadingly situated the tastes of the masses as the problem. This ingrained cultural presumption not only relies on class distinction, it also conveniently ignores the increasingly significant role the consumer economy plays in the media



landscape. This leads to the final reason. The historical trajectory of various technologies – radio, broadcast television, cable television, and the Internet – explicitly illustrate how commercial interests and market power are allowed to dominate in the American media landscape. This means Americans need to be especially vigilant, and a bourgeois consumer citizenship grounded in the inherent value of self-governance and privatization makes this a very challenging task.

Two other important findings from the 1980s – the role audience commodification and industry convergence played in Bravo's evolution – highlight how commercial interests and market power were taking hold in new ways. First, Bravo transitioned to a dual revenue stream at the end of the 1980s. This meant Bravo needed to sell an audience commodity to potential advertisers. Second, in 1989, parent company Cablevision engaged in industry convergence with NBC. This partnership gave the broadcast network partial ownership in the Cablevision subsidiary that housed the Bravo cable network (Rainbow Programming Services). These two developments happened within a cultural and political economic context characterized by gains in cable subscribers and decreases in broadcast viewership. Accordingly, they give visibility to how a neophyte cable channel (Bravo), a Long Island based cable provider (Cablevision), and a well-established media conglomerate (NBC) navigated the move away from network era television.

### **The Rise of Postnetwork Television**

Audience commodification bookmarked Bravo's historical trajectory in the 1990s, it started small with reliance on corporate sponsorship at the beginning of the decade. Then, as the decade progressed, Bravo used syndicated programming,

original programming, and promotion to expand its reach as a cable network. Finally, Bravo closed the decade with a shift to a full advertising format. My findings from the 1990s illustrate the challenges of a hybrid subscriber/advertiser model. In this instance, audience commodification functioned as a slow growing and powerful cancer.

Syndicated programming, original programming, and promotion are three ways Bravo addressed the needs of its advertisers in the 1990s. While these developments did not lead Bravo to abandon its reliance on class distinction or cultural arts programming, they did fracture Bravo's brand identity. For example, *Twin Peaks*, a syndicated drama that aired as a part of *The TV Too Good for TV* showcase, embodies the dissonance that characterized Bravo's brand identity. On the one hand, Bravo relied on a broadcast rerun to increase its mainstream appeal. On the other hand, Bravo marketed *Twin Peaks* within a showcase (*The TV Too Good for TV*) that touted how Bravo's content was superior to broadcast network programming. Similarly, the original series *Inside the Actor's Studio* clearly tapped into bourgeois consumer citizenship via host James Lipton's high-minded educational approach to interviewing guests. Simultaneously, this well-known talk show, which still aired on Bravo as late as 2013, evidences signs of the reality programming that come to characterize Bravo in the new century via its attention to authenticity and celebrity lifestyle. The promotional effort Bravo and AMC closed the decade with is less nuanced. In fact, the synergistic joint sponsorship arrangement with Victoria's Secret is emblematic of the interwoven relations

amongst branding, commodification, and convergence that come to characterize Bravo in the 2000s.

When we consider these three examples together, we find that the use of *Twin Peaks* to increase viewership via syndicated programming and the creation of *Inside the Actor's Studio* to broaden appeal, along with Bravo concerted effort to move beyond traditional advertising (e.g. behind-the-scenes movie shorts and the joint buy Victoria Secret made to sponsor programming on Bravo and AMC), are all driven by the process of audience commodification. Audience commodification was a cancer that grew at Bravo throughout the 1990s. Audience commodification slowly and methodically made Bravo look more like its broadcast counterparts. Despite this, Bravo castigated commercial broadcasting's values and programming content to create a distinct brand identity.

As Bravo moved away from its highly specialized niche and commercial-free viewing context, Cablevision used Bravo's cultural recognition as a launching pad for IFC (1994) and World Cinema (1997). The development of these two premium film channels made Bravo's niche film specialization a glaring redundancy in the cable network offerings for Rainbow Programming. Then unsurprisingly, at the end of the decade, Bravo announced it would move from program sponsorship to traditional advertising. Bravo's turn to a fully-supported advertising format and reliance on syndicated programming, along with the blurring of the boundaries between basic cable and network broadcasting, made it next to impossible for Bravo to distinguish itself from commercial broadcasters via a lowbrow/highbrow binary.

## Rebranding Bravo

Branding, commodification, and convergence played a role throughout Bravo's historical trajectory. Nonetheless, one of the most important findings is the sheer quantitative and qualitative presence these discursive and material entities have acquired as they have slowly and methodically penetrated day-to-day life. Over three decades, branding,<sup>143</sup> commodification,<sup>144</sup> and convergence<sup>145</sup> have evolved in unimaginable ways that have led to new terminology. At Bravo, brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence coalesce into a dense web of spectacle that allowed gendered viewers to produce and consume on behalf of this cable network.

As I have argued, Bravo's affluent lifestyle entertainment embodies the value of capitalist patriarchy via heteronormative relations and a gendered public/private binary. Food, fashion, beauty, design, and popular culture dominate across multiple texts, platforms, and industries. The gendered viewers that engage affluent lifestyle entertainment are not dupes. They do not consume and produce as mindless drones. To the contrary, they are interactive agents making individual choices in an overdetermined cultural, political economic, and technological context the privileges self-governance and privatization. Bravo's Affluent lifestyle

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<sup>143</sup> Branding now encompasses an array of terms, including but not limited to: branded entertainment, brand management, brand cultures, self-branding, personal branding, rebranding, and brand management.

<sup>144</sup> Commodification now encompasses an array of terms, including but not limited to: audience commodification, gendered commodification, cybernetic commodification, and aesthetic commodities.

<sup>145</sup> Convergence now encompasses an array of terms, including but not limited to: digital convergence, industry convergence, program convergence, platform convergence, and convergence culture.

entertainment offers these gendered viewers respite from the overwhelming spectacle of capitalist patriarchy. “Authentic” moments allow for laughter, outrage, judgment, and transgression. Unfortunately, this very appealing side of irony is not the whole story. Even in the best circumstances (e.g. a viewers interprets and understands “ironic meaning”), “literal meaning” has power. Irony is so effective as an aesthetic commodity because it taps into the cultural ambivalence surrounding capitalist patriarchy. I have offered specific examples of how irony is deployed (e.g. ostentatious branded entertainment, conspicuous lifestyle, conspicuous consumption, conspicuous consumption, and dysfunctional female characters). By no means are these the only ways irony is used to exploit the cultural ambivalence surrounding capitalist patriarchy in Bravo’s affluent lifestyle entertainment. Ultimately, my findings illustrate how Bravo literally and figuratively sells a sexed subjectivity grounded in self-pleasing, hyper-sexuality, and affluent lifestyle. Moreover, I have shown how capitalism and patriarchy have adapted over time. While sexed subjectivity (self-pleasing, hyper-sexuality, and affluent lifestyle) may be a more optimal alternative than gendered subjectivity (selflessness, domesticity, and family lifestyle) that does not mean it is not oppressive.

This new realm of gendered programming supports the discursive and material iteration of postfeminist nouveau rich consumer citizenship across various genres, texts, mediums, and platforms. From dramatic comedies<sup>146</sup> and

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<sup>146</sup> Including, but not limited to: *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004); *The OC* (Fox, 2003-2007); *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2007); *Lipstick Jungle* (NBC, 2008-2009); *Cashmere Mafia* (ABC, 2008-2009); *GCB* (ABC, 2012); and *The Carrie Dairies* (2013-present).

reality programming<sup>147</sup> on broadcast and cable television, to books and motion pictures.<sup>148</sup> The postfeminist nouveau riche consumer citizenship embodied in affluent lifestyle entertainment is antithetical to a democratic form of citizenship that challenges intersecting forms of oppression that span gender, race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. This is true for at least three reasons. First, it naturalizes heteronormative relations and White gendered wealth. Second, it relies on a gendered public/private binary that relegates women's personal responsibilities to the private realm. Third, it offers consumption practices and lifestyle interests as a viable route to equality, thereby ignoring the role capitalism and patriarchy play in inequality. At a point in American history characterized by vast economic inequality the increasing prevalence of affluent lifestyle entertainment is unsurprising. This gendered entertainment content formed, exists within, and supports a neoliberal cultural, political economic, and technological climate that advocates capitalist patriarchy.

### **Conclusion**

Bravo's historical trajectory as a cable network gives visibility to the evolution of discursive and material processes in three interconnected realms. The first realm is "citizenship." Here my case analysis of Bravo showed the shift away from bourgeois consumer citizenship on the one hand, and toward nouveau riche consumer citizenship on the other. The second realm involves "capitalism" and

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<sup>147</sup> Including, but not limited to: *Project Runway* (Bravo, 2004-2008 and Lifetime, 2009-present); *The Real Housewives* (Bravo, 2005 – present); *Big Rich Texas* (Style, 2011-present); and *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (E!, 2007-present).

<sup>148</sup> Including, but not limited to: the *Sex and the City* franchise, the *Bridget Jones* franchise, the *Confessions of a Shopaholic* franchise, all of which include multiple books and at least one motion picture.

“patriarchy.” This was about the movement away from patriarchal capitalism and gendered subjectivity on the one hand, and toward capitalist patriarchy and sexed subjectivity on the other. The final realm is different. It does not work to say there was a move away from “branding,” “commodification,” and “convergence.” Instead, in this instance, these discursive and material processes became larger and more cumbersome. They took on a new presence in our day-to-day lives. For me, it feels like this realm is harder to contain. Possibly, this is because brand management, cybernetic commodification, and digital convergence in my mind have less “history.” My effort to note how this third realm “stands out” in no way suggests I do not see overlaps. To the contrary, as I initially stated, I view these realms as interconnected.

In conclusion, I believe the most valuable finding in my case analysis of the Bravo cable network is how changes slowly and methodically occurred in (1) “citizenship” (2) “capitalism” and “patriarchy,” and (3) “branding,” “commodification,” and “convergence.” The progression of these discursive and material processes is not now, and will never be “complete.” For me, historicizing how these three realms evolved is a tragic tale that illustrates the enduring presence of neoliberal ideals grounded in privatization, self-governance, and personal responsibility.

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