



FROM NETWORKS TO NETFLIX

A Guide to Changing Channels

EDITED BY
DEREK JOHNSON

ROUTLEDGE



"If you thought that the TV channel was dead, then *From Networks to Netflix* will prove you wrong. Derek Johnson has gathered together an impressive range of cutting edge scholarship that demonstrates that channels not only matter, but also are essential tools for understanding the current and future development of television."

– Catherine Johnson, *University of Nottingham, UK*

"*From Networks to Netflix* is essential reading for anyone interested in the future of television. More than carefully researched channel biographies, the essays in this book together constitute an original retheorization of television's organizational forms – and a reflection on the aggregation, branding, and formatting of media more generally."

– Ramon Lobato, *RMIT University, Australia*

"*From Networks to Netflix* challenges readers to rethink how we approach legacy channels and new platforms. Johnson has assembled a formidable array of scholars, who, in pleasurable prose, chronicle and analyze industrial strategies, curatorial practices, distribution, and viewership habits. Covering 'old,' new, and emergent channels, this collection deftly oscillates between networks and platforms."

– Ben Aslinger, *Bentley University, USA*

Even as the television industry experiences significant transformation and disruption in the face of streaming and online delivery, the television channel itself persists. If anything, the television channel landscape has become more complex to navigate, as viewers can now choose between broadcast, cable, streaming, and premium services across a host of different platforms and devices. *From Networks to Netflix* provides an authoritative answer to that navigational need, helping students, instructors, and scholars understand these industrial changes through the lens of the channel. Through examination of emerging services like Hulu and Amazon Prime Video, investigation of YouTube channels and cable outlets like Freeform and Comedy Central, and critiques of broadcast giants like ABC and PBS, this book offers a concrete, tangible means of exploring the foundations of a changing industry.

Derek Johnson is Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA. He is the author of *Creative License and Collaboration in the Cultural Industries*, editor of *A Companion to Media Authorship*, and co-author of *Management in the Entertainment Industries* and *Analyzing Media Retail*.

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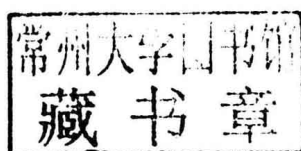


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Edited by Derek Johnson



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Introduction



Pop

Television Guides and Recommendations in a Changing Channel Landscape

Derek Johnson

In fall 2014, the US-based TV Guide Network announced it would abandon its name to become a new service called Pop. With ratings still “on the rise” for the existing channel, press releases described this shift not as a complete revolution so much as a “brand refresh”; carrying over interest in celebrity and celebration of television inherited from its predecessor, Pop would “focus on entertainment and the world of fandom.” Channel president Brad Schwartz promised this embrace of pop culture would support quality programming “so good, it pops” (“Network” 2014). Yet one could also read a third kind of “pop” from this development: the bursting of linear models of television delivery in which many viewers relied upon print and electronic versions of *TV Guide* (or some other ordered list of channels and their scheduled program offerings) to navigate a complex channel environment.

When first published in 1953, *TV Guide* magazine featured in-color entertainment news stories about television stars and national network programming as well as black-and-white listings of the channels and programs scheduled for viewers throughout the day, with localized versions produced for over 100 different areas of the US. While *TV Guide* was the single most circulated national magazine in the 1960s (Farber and Bailey 2001, 397), the navigational need shared by television viewers supported similar efforts by *TV Choice* (United Kingdom), Figaro’s *TV Magazine* (France), local newspapers, and many more publications across the world. Feature stories, spotlight reviews, and starred ratings all helped readers sort through their viewing choices—to which channels’ curated programming lineups should they tune their televisions? This problem of choice would only exacerbate as new cable and satellite services joined terrestrial broadcast channels, beginning in the 1970s and expanding through the 1990s. Viewers required a guide in a crowded channel landscape.

The cable service TV Guide Network brought this navigational function to the television screen, experimenting with a mix of scrolling program listings and entertainment

features. TV Guide Network was a channel about channels, providing viewers with a portal to the hundreds of choices available to them. As one of those choices, however, TV Guide faced pressure to thrive as an entertainment service in its own right; to attract carriage fees and advertising revenues, the channel needed to be more than a “waystation” for television viewing, but also a “destination” in and of itself (Motavalli 2004). Between 1999 and 2013, this pressure led to experimentation with new programming formats to run alongside—and eventually replace—its listings. The disappearance of TV Guide Network in favor of Pop, therefore, represents not just abandoned brand legacy, but more significantly the passage of an entire navigational apparatus for engaging with linear television. One might assume that viewers simply do not need this kind of guide anymore. Able to subscribe to, search for, and stream programs rather than relying on the linear programming schedules of broadcast and cable channels, the users of newer non-linear services like Netflix and Hulu have no need for program listings. Non-linear viewers can be their own guides.

However, as one of hundreds of channels fighting to sustain themselves in a mature television industry beset by challenges from digital upstarts, Pop’s emergence from the vestiges of TV Guide reveals much about the forces currently transforming the experience and business of television. As much as the Pop story suggests the passage of linear guides from increasingly non-linear television screens, it also helps us see why channels—as well as guides for navigating them—remain useful and essential means of understanding, researching, and criticizing television, as much if not more than ever before. While their functions change, and new navigational guides provide new curated pathways and recommendations, channels still matter. This book shows its readers how and why, providing its own navigational guide that anyone interested in the television industries can use to make sense of the abundance of choices and changes that define the channel landscape.

CHANNELS AND CONJUNCTURES IN A NETWORKED ERA

Insistence on the continued relevance of channels and television guides is neither intuitive nor uncontroversial. In a “post-network” moment in which “viewers now increasingly select what, when, and where to view from abundant options,” power has shifted considerably away from industry professionals who program specific channels and channel networks in uniform, scheduled ways (Lotz 2014, 28). The dominance of a few, bottlenecked broadcast services has given way to a “networked” era, as described by Aymar Jean Christian (2018), in which the more open and participatory affordances of the Internet enable audiences to make programming choices while independent modes of production and distribution thrive outside the control of traditional channel gatekeepers. If channels represent these older, passing industry models, some argue they should be of decreasing concern to those of us tracking this exciting post-network—but networked—state of affairs.

For example, *TechCrunch* writer Tom Goodwin (2016) argues that as streaming services like Netflix deliver television programming through the Internet, “two