

ELECTRONIC MEDIA PROGRAMMING

STRATEGIES AND DECISION MAKING



RAYMOND L. CARROLL • DONALD M. DAVIS

Electronic Media Programming

Strategies and Decision Making

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Preface

Writing about radio and television during the 1990s has seemed akin to trying to catch lightning in a jar. It is becoming predictable that events will overtake the established order so often and so quickly that by the time a manuscript is submitted yet another major change will occur. Even so, understanding the bases upon which electronic media programming decisions are made enables practitioners to function more effectively day-to-day and to more astutely anticipate the future—volatile though it is. Although the circumstances are ever changing, the essentials of practice follow consistent principles.

NEED FOR THE TEXT

Our motive in undertaking this book is to impart understanding of the workings of professional electronic media decision making in the greatest breadth and depth possible. We have noted with some dismay that many students seem to have little understanding of the realities of the electronic media industry. This is understandable since each of us focuses on things that we find meaningful, and we are all products of our experience. One of our tasks as professors, though, is to provide experience that will let students know what is needed to be successful practitioners in this fiercely competitive world.

Most of the important work pertaining to electronic media is conducted in offices, not in studios. The real performers are those behind the scenes who make the decisions that determine what “products,” as programs are often called, get on the air. We approached this book with the premise that its readers would prefer to be decision makers, able to exert some influence over what is presented to their audiences.

Regardless of whether he or she aspires to a career in management, sales, program production, programming, or some other endeavor related to electronic media, the reader should be served well by an orientation to the bases for programming strategy. Even though the process is imperfect and inexact, the leaders in electronic media seem to apply the concepts we discuss.

FEATURES OF THE TEXT

Current Examples

Despite constant flux in electronic media, we have used examples that are as current as we can make them. The alternative is to illustrate our subject with generalities that would serve neither our intent nor the reader’s purpose in using the book. If one or another among our examples or illustrations appears to be a bit behind whatever is in vogue, our readers should recog-

nize the likelihood that what is now current will quickly pass. This is a very trendy business, but illustration through the familiar and the recent should help in circumstances yet to be confronted.

Unity in Approach

We wished to present a unified whole in the book. Each section is intended as a foundation for chapters that follow, although the reader can skip some of the discussion and not lack orientation when turning to another part of the book.

Sections were designed to stand together in spite of occasional repetition of a concept introduced earlier. The different forms of television— independent stations, network affiliated TV stations, local cable system program channels, cable and broadcast television networks, commercial stations, and noncommercial stations— follow similar programming strategies that are adapted to the outlet's unique needs. The comparability of each form is due to a common source of programming. Rather than treat each in a vacuum, we attempt to show where they overlap as well as how they differ.

Seeking Further Knowledge

We want our readers to understand that to advance in their careers they must continue to acquire insight. Consequently, we recommend additional sources of information at the end of each chapter, and we explain how these resources embellish the discussion in the chapter and broaden the reader's awareness and professional perspectives.

The Language of Electronic Media Decision Makers

A career in the electronic media requires the acquisition of its vocabulary and an understanding of how it is applied. Important terms are emphasized in **boldface** in the text because they serve as the shorthand by which most practitioners communicate. The beginner who can carry on a

conversation with a prospective employer without need for interpretation has an advantage. To assist in learning this language we have provided definitions of terms where they are introduced in the text. An extensive glossary is included at the end of the book for easy reference.

Program Appeals

Although this book is not about creating programs, many programming decisions depend on projecting the likelihood of their success in attracting and maintaining an audience. Thus, attention is given throughout the book to the ways that program content can attract viewers and how these appeals are applied to programming decisions. Such knowledge is also crucial to radio programming because the elements of music programs are assembled and scheduled by the programmer.

Marketing: A Consumer Orientation to Programming

The plethora of listening and viewing options available to electronic media audiences has made it a consumer's market. This has caused a fundamental shift in strategies, wherein programmers ascertain listener and viewer needs and wants and then attempt to fulfill them. That orientation is emphasized in this book since it is the basis for much of the decision making in programming.

Research: Reducing Risk

Our emphasis in the first part of the book is on audience research since it is used in making many decisions about which programs will be offered. Research can be thought of as a tool for reducing the elements of uncertainty. Procedures for conducting research and interpreting its results constitute the rules of the game in many programming situations. It is incumbent on programmers to understand these rules in order to compete effectively in attracting and maintaining listeners and viewers.

Economics

Electronic media programming success is not measured by the number of people who watched or listened, but by whether the program schedule was profitable. Throughout the book we identify economic considerations that affect programming decisions, including which programs to acquire and when they should be scheduled if they are to achieve economic success.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Part One orients the reader to the foundation for decision making in programming: audience research. Chapter 1 provides the context for the book. Chapter 2 looks at the concept of identifying audience needs and wants and providing content that will satisfy them. Since marketing objectives are determined by assessing the attributes of the potential audience, understanding research procedures is integral to determining strategies and evaluating their effectiveness. Chapter 3 looks at how programs are designed to attract and maintain listeners and viewers. Chapter 4 introduces the reader to the fundamentals of research. This foundation is followed in Chapter 5 by a review of the procedures used to determine the size and scope of electronic media audiences. Then Chapter 6 discusses how research is directly applied in programming decisions.

Part Two concentrates on radio programming. Chapter 7 looks at the way radio stations are organized and how radio market attributes—including the facilities and the programming of competitors—influence programming objectives. Chapter 8 reviews the development of modern radio formats, describes the major formats used by stations today, and examines their economic potential and audience appeal. The ingredients in program formulas are described in Chapter 9, where the execution of radio formatting is detailed. Chapter 10 looks at sources of radio program content.

Television programming is considered in Part Three, starting with Chapter 11, where the TV

programmer's job is reviewed, along with market influences and the way viewer habits influence programming strategies. Then, in Chapter 12, strategies for attracting and maintaining TV audiences are detailed. Considerations in acquiring programming rights by stations are discussed in Chapter 13. Chapter 14 then discusses the strategies used by stations that not only must acquire all the programs they broadcast but have to compete against the attractive programs offered on network affiliates. The tables turn in Chapter 15, where the advantages of their larger audiences give network-affiliated station programmers more options in acquiring and scheduling the most attractive programs available. Chapter 16 considers program development and acquisition and the problems of networks in competing for the national audience. An important program form for both television stations and networks is considered in Chapter 17, which discusses news programs and how stations and their networks are reacting to a changing competitive environment. Special considerations in programming noncommercial or public television stations are dealt with in Chapter 18, including public station programming sources, competition for audiences, and the way programming costs are covered.

Part Four turns to cable television and its unique programming needs. Chapter 19 reviews the development of cable television systems and how the abundance of channels has affected the structure of the television industry. The factors involved in acquiring program services and assigning their channel placement on local cable systems are considered in Chapter 20, followed by a look at the programming strategies of such cable networks as Nickelodeon, Lifetime, and ESPN in Chapter 21. Chapter 22 reviews the strategies used in programming the major premium cable services.

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Raymond L. Carroll
Donald M. Davis

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Audience and Program Assessment

Before expanding on specific aspects of programming that are dealt with in later chapters, Chapter 1 provides an overview of programming, which includes how people use the electronic media in their daily lives. Their habits influence programming decisions, as do regulations, similarities and differences in the electronic media, and economic considerations like the size of the audience that can be attracted. Putting such knowledge to use requires certain skills and influences the strategies that determine program choices provided to consumers.

The electronic media are in the business of delivering audiences to advertisers. That seems straightforward enough, but presenting program content that will draw desired listeners or viewers is an expensive proposition. Wrong decisions mean that the cash invested in program content is wasted. Equally important, program content that does not attract a sufficiently large audience usually results in a reduction in advertising revenue. Part 1 of this book explains how electronic media programmers reduce risk by relying on audience and program research to guide their decisions.

Research can help reduce risk by identifying audience needs and wants and determining the programming content that will satisfy them. In the past programs could be presented with little risk of rejection because consumer options were limited, but electronic media operation has moved into an era of

consumer orientation, and audiences now have a wide range of viewing and listening choices. Chapter 2 looks at how modern programmers approach the challenge of gaining audiences by ascertaining who is available to watch or listen, determining the motivations and needs of different groups of viewers and listeners, and offering programming that serves their wants and needs.

Even with the reduction of risk facilitated by audience research, programming is as much an art as a science. Thus, programmers must evaluate and understand the content of programs in order to schedule them effectively. Chapter 3 discusses the appeals of programs to audiences, explains how television programs are structured to meet the demands of the medium, and goes on to describe the major program types. This chapter also analyzes the structure of radio programs and the important role personalities play in most radio programming.

Chapter 4 presents a review of the elements of research, or the "rules of the research game." A good grasp of the fundamentals of research provides the basis for understanding the procedures used by the audience research services that supply this crucial information to stations, cable operators, networks, and advertisers. In Chapter 5, the electronic media players are described and their respective specialties are introduced. Chapter 6 discusses how research is used in making programming decisions.

Overview of Electronic Media Programming: Strategies and Decision Making

WHAT IS ELECTRONIC MEDIA PROGRAMMING?

- Attracting and Maintaining Audiences
- Programming Strategy
- Programming as Part of a System

INFLUENCES ON PROGRAMMING DECISIONS

- Salability
- Profitability
- Competition
- Management Policy
- Trends
- Station Facilities
- Regulation
- Citizens' Groups

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

IN PROGRAMMING THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

- Radio
- Television
- Cable

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BROADCAST AND CABLE MARKETS

- National (Network) versus Local Programming
- Large Markets
- Small Markets

SKILLS INVOLVED IN PROGRAMMING

- Audience Research

- Computer Literacy

- Marketing Orientation

- Sales Orientation

- Objectivity

- Legal Knowledge

- People Skill

ETHICS: THE PROGRAMMER'S RESPONSIBILITY

WHY STUDY PROGRAMMING?

SUMMARY

SUGGESTED READINGS

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KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

- Affiliate

- Clearance

- Demographic Segments

- Deregulation

- Genre

- Independent Station

- Market

- Payola

- Public File

- Salability

- Strategy

- Superstation

- Tactic

- Target Audience

- Plugola

Like millions of other families across the country, the members of the Jones family arise to the sounds of their clock radios. Suzie, who is 15 years old, always wakes up to the latest rock hits on Power 99 and continues to listen as she fixes her hair and puts on makeup. Her 18-year-old brother, Ted, listens to rap music on compact discs or cassette tapes as he dresses for the day. Their mother and father, who are 40 years old, wake up to an adult-oriented rock station.

Radio has long been an individual medium for its audience members. Television started as a group or family medium because the high cost of TV receivers made it difficult to have more than one set in the typical household, but it too is becoming personalized. Since TV was introduced in the 1940s, the cost of receivers has been reduced dramatically. A majority of American homes today are multiple-set households with receivers in several rooms, accommodating differing tastes.

When Mr. and Mrs. Jones stumble into the kitchen to brew coffee and make toast, they may turn on the TV and watch the *Today* show. Or perhaps they've struck a deal with 8-year-old Bobby, who is an early riser. Bobby can watch animated cartoons while he eats his cereal but must give up the TV in the kitchen when Ted and Suzie show up to watch *Good Morning America*. By that time Bobby has finished breakfast and is happy to go to the basement den, where he can watch *Double Dare* uninterrupted until his mother calls him upstairs to catch the bus for school.

Although many viewers and listeners are available early in the morning, their schedules take them out of the audience as they leave their homes. After the children depart for school, Mrs. Jones enjoys a second cup of coffee during the first portion of *Donahue* before she too must be off to her job. Meanwhile, Mr. Jones has rejoined the radio audience on his way to work, alternately listening to his favorite music station, Easy 102, and to Countryopolitan 104, a station that he doesn't like as well but that provides the best traffic reports. By the time Mr. Jones pulls into the parking lot at work, his high-school-

aged son and daughter have stored their *Walkman* radio/tape players in their lockers, where they will remain until the children leave for home that afternoon.

Mr. Jones, Mrs. Jones, and the children are away from the television during the workday. But across town Mrs. Jones's older sister, Aunt Flora, who does not work outside the home, watches *Joan Rivers*. This is not only a relaxing occasion but an opportunity to participate vicariously in a discussion of subjects of interest to those in her peer group. Flora's husband removed himself from the potential audience when he left the house to go to work, and she is part of the predominantly older female audience available to watch during the morning and early afternoon.

Technological developments have had a strong impact on the habits of many people in the radio and television audiences. The clock radio has created a large audience that hears radio programming the first thing every morning. Television viewers have overcome the tyranny of the clock that dictates that programs must be watched when they are broadcast, thanks to the videocassette recorder (VCR). Of course, some people choose not to watch or listen. Ted, for example, prefers recorded music and is therefore unavailable for radio programming at most times of the day.

Even though Mrs. Jones isn't at home when Flora watches soap operas, the sisters eagerly discuss the latest calamities and transgressions of the programs' characters when they get together. Mrs. Jones solved the problem of watching her favorite soap operas when the family acquired a VCR.

With an increasing number of women in the work force, programmers cannot rely on traditional viewing habits. Mrs. Jones's job has limited the hours when she is available to watch TV and affects what she can listen to while at work. She must make choices based not only on her personal preference but on the situation in which she does her listening.

Mrs. Jones has a private office where she can listen to the radio, so she tunes in Easy 102,

which features soft rock music. She doesn't mind listening to Power 99 as she and Suzie drive to the mall, but the music and comments of the disc jockeys distract her as she attempts to complete reports at her desk. Suzie, who is not as tolerant, calls Easy 102's programming "elevator music" and pretends she's gagging whenever that station is tuned in on the car radio.

As the day progresses, new members of the radio and TV audiences become available and programming offerings are adjusted to accommodate this influx. As the door to her locker slams shut at the end of the school day, Suzie tunes in Power 99 on her *Walkman*. Bobby arrives home and goes straight to the kitchen, where he turns on the TV and begins watching cartoons while eating an after-school snack. When Suzie arrives, she goes to her room, where she talks on the telephone and watches MTV. Mom arrives a little later and rewinds the videotape recording of her soaps while she gets dinner started. As the casserole is baking in the oven, she fast-forwards through the commercials and the slower scenes in the unfolding drama. After reviewing the soaps, Mom usually tunes in *Oprah Winfrey* or *Geraldo* while completing her preparations for the evening meal.

Programmers adjust their content to cater to people who are available to watch or listen. Few TV stations schedule cartoons before children are out of school, for instance, because cartoons have little appeal to the dominant audience of adult viewers. Since the female audience is much larger than other potential audiences during that period, most afternoon programming is designed to appeal to women.

While Mrs. Jones is watching *Geraldo* interview men who have married women old enough to be their mothers, Mr. Jones is sitting motionless on the freeway alternately listening to the disc jockey on Countryopolitan 104 suggest that motorists use a different route and punching up Easy 102, which features a breezy announcer and up-tempo soft rock music during the afternoon. He is attempting to relax during a very frustrating part of his day. When he finally arrives home, he and Mrs. Jones watch the net-

work news, but Mrs. Jones leaves early in the program to take care of a last-minute chore because she has already watched almost an hour of local news and little on this newscast seems new. She joins the children, who are in the kitchen watching a rerun of *Alf*.

After dinner, the older children go off to do their homework, accompanied by their radios, their tapes, and MTV. Bobby and his father watch a situation comedy on CBS TV until his bedtime. When Mr. Jones changes the station to watch a nature documentary on the Discovery Channel, Mrs. Jones drifts off to the bedroom, where she will watch a network rerun on Lifetime since nothing on ABC, CBS, or NBC seems especially appealing. The paltry viewing choices on TV remind her that she should stop by the video rental store to pick up a movie she has been wanting to see.

Suzie, who has finished her homework, is listening to the radio again. This is her favorite time of day to listen, since the music and the disc jockeys are much more attuned to the interests of people her age. She has called twice to request her favorite song on Power 99. Ted, who hasn't watched much TV all day, tunes in *Arsenio Hall* for a while to relax after his homework. Mr. and Mrs. Jones will watch a bit of the *Tonight* show on NBC before they go to sleep. Then, with their clock radio alarms set, the Joneses are ready for the start of a similar day the next morning.

This scenario is played out in millions of American households every day. Since potential viewers and listeners have so many alternatives, it is important to develop a strategy to attract some portion of the listening and viewing audiences as they change during the day. Programming is thus a challenging, ever-changing, and essential activity in the operation of any electronic media outlet, whether a radio or TV station, a cable system, a broadcast network, or a cable network. That process is the subject of this book.

This chapter will give the reader an overview of the considerations involved in programming the electronic media. We define programming

Calvin and Hobbes

by Bill Watterson



FIGURE 1-1 *Calvin and Hobbes* © 1990 Watterson. Dist. by Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

before going on to discuss major influences on programming decisions. We then differentiate among the electronic media and the kinds of markets in which they operate, noting how different audiences can be served. We go on to review the skills needed to program effectively in the modern electronic media environment. Since programmers do not carry out their responsibilities in a vacuum, we raise some of the ethical considerations that they encounter every day. At the end of the chapter we address a fundamental question: Why study programming? This is followed by a chapter summary.

WHAT IS ELECTRONIC MEDIA PROGRAMMING?

Attracting and Maintaining Audiences

Electronic media programming is the planning and scheduling of programs to attract and maintain a specified audience. People spend many hours every day with the electronic media. The question is, *What* do they watch or listen to and *for how long* before they turn to an alternative source or abandon the media altogether? The programmer answers these questions by plan-

ning programming that will attract and maintain the largest possible audience throughout the entire programming day and induce a loyalty to a particular station or program that will motivate listeners or viewers to return day after day.

As we showed in the example of the Jones family, the audience becomes more narrowly defined after the day has started since many of the people who were available to watch early-morning programs are gone, leaving a somewhat older, predominantly female audience at home. Throughout the day, programming changes to address the needs and interests of the available audience.

Programming Strategy

A programmer is the person at a station, network, or cable system who is responsible for determining not only the type of programming but the schedule of program content to be presented each day. Thus, the programmer's job is to create a strategy for scheduling programs that will attract and maintain a specified audience. A **strategy** includes the identification of an objective and the determination of the steps that will contribute to achieving that goal. For instance,

the Lifetime Network's strategy has been to create an identity among the myriad alternatives available to television audiences. That network has identified as its **target audience** adult women. Each program in the Lifetime schedule is a step in that plan; each is designed to appeal to women. The Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) follows a strategy of specializing in sports programming. Part of ESPN's strategy is to accumulate a large audience over several hours or even several days by repeating programs at different times. ESPN pursues this strategy because few viewers watch a sports channel exclusively.

Each step, or **tactic**, should be orchestrated to contribute to the objective. ESPN once presented reruns of college football games that originally had been broadcast live a few days earlier on a broadcast television network. This tactic offered sports enthusiasts an attractive program even though most knew its outcome. For dyed-in-the-wool followers, the repeat was another chance to see their teams in action. For other football fans, it was an opportunity to see a good game they might have missed in its original showing. Furthermore, the football game was repeated at different times during the week, giving viewers an alternative to less interesting programs on competing channels. Also, ESPN was able to acquire a program with considerable potential appeal at a relatively low cost since the game had already been broadcast. The network could accumulate the audience needed to make that investment worthwhile by offering repeated showings at no additional cost; the fact that it was a big-time college game reinforced ESPN's image as a sports network.

Some tactics don't work as planned. For example, Lifetime acquired the rights to *Moonlighting*, originally shown on ABC, at a fairly low cost because the program's producers could not interest individual broadcast stations in purchasing it to air on local outlets. Programmers at TV stations did not believe the program would have much appeal to their local audiences during the afternoon, when they needed to fill their schedules. Although Lifetime's audience is small by

traditional network standards, the tactic of airing *Moonlighting* was logical since it fit the network's strategy of offering shows that appeal primarily to women. Many women had been attracted to the series, starring Cybill Shepherd and Bruce Willis, when it was originally broadcast on ABC. *Moonlighting*, scheduled during the evening prime-time period, was expected to attract a large enough audience to make Lifetime's investment profitable. That tactic failed when *Moonlighting* received disappointing ratings, so Lifetime moved the show to midnight and replaced it during prime time with reruns of the NBC TV series *L.A. Law*, which it promoted on the air with wry commercials that referred to the lawyers in the series as "hunky guys in dark suits."¹ The new program was successful in that time period, supporting Lifetime's strategy of attempting to reach women viewers.

Programming as Part of a System

Stations, networks, and cable TV franchises are systems composed of departments of administration, sales, news, public affairs, engineering, and production. All the members of the station's staff must have knowledge about the other parts of the system so that it can be "tuned up," or fixed when broken.

Whether one anticipates producing programs, wants to work in time sales, or plans a career as a disc jockey or news anchorperson, appreciating the programming objectives of a station or network can only help one's performance and success. It is unrealistic, for instance, to consider news as a separate entity in any system's operation. A newsperson who ignores his or her employer's strategy of targeting a specific audience not only fails to contribute to that important objective but interferes with the likelihood of its success, especially if that newsperson alienates members of the audience. If a radio station is attempting to attract men and women age 25 to 54 and features Country music, broadcasting a news story about Paula Abdul would not be a good tactic, since that kind of information is of little interest to the audience the station is serv-

ing. Or consider a situation where a newscaster is preparing a newscast for a station that plays popular rock music. Would that station's audience be concerned with the news that Social Security benefits are being raised by 1 percent? This does not mean that the news staff should ignore the story but that it should not be the lead in a newscast and should be given less emphasis than it would on a station whose primary audience is older listeners.

Like a newscaster, an account executive, or advertising time salesperson, must be aware of the station's strategy and the audience it seeks to attract in order to understand why some commercials are detrimental to achieving that goal. Programmers of successful radio stations are concerned with the quality of commercial messages since listeners may tune out if the ads become too annoying. Thus, the number of commercials, where they are placed in the program, and how well they fit with other content are crucial considerations. The programmer at an easy-listening radio station would probably resist accepting a "hard sell" commercial that used loud rock music, sound effects, and a bellowing announcer because such an advertisement would be jarring to listeners accustomed to a relaxed presentation.

In a similar vein, a television producer must build the program around breaks where advertising messages are inserted at the local level or the network level. If the program does not sustain its audience through the commercial breaks, it will not remain on the air for very long since advertising is the means through which most electronic media outlets generate operating revenues.

INFLUENCES ON PROGRAMMING DECISIONS

Just as a field general has many things to consider in conducting a battle (the terrain, the number of troops, the weather, food supplies, ammunition), a programmer's strategy is affected by a number of factors. Among them are program salability, profitability, competition, management

policy, sponsor availability and interest, social trends, and the technical capabilities of the medium. Each of these influences helps shape programming decisions, and several of them are discussed below.

Salability

Earlier, we defined programming as the planning and scheduling of programs to attract and maintain a specified audience. That is the activity, but the *purpose* of programming is to bring audiences to advertisers' messages. The local appliance dealer wants to avoid door-to-door selling or reliance on word of mouth to sell refrigerators. To let consumers know about his or her line and induce them to make purchases, the dealer "buys" access to potential customers through local radio or television stations or local cable channels. Thus, *salability* is the attractiveness of a program to advertisers as an effective means of reaching potential consumers.

The real business of electronic media: delivering audiences It seems obvious that radio and TV stations and networks are in the entertainment and information business, but that is only the means to an end since the program content is put on the air to attract an audience. Since revenue comes from the sale of advertising time, the electronic media are in the business of delivering audiences to advertisers: The larger the audience they can be expected to deliver, the more advertising dollars they will bring in and the greater profit they will earn.

Advertisers routinely influence what is programmed because they need to reach certain kinds of consumers. Programmers are happy to comply since they depend on advertisers' revenues. Since 25- to 54-year-old women make most of the purchasing decisions for the majority of products, stations and networks present the kind of programs they think will attract this group in hopes of capitalizing on potential advertising revenue. However, no program can be all things to all people. Very young listeners' tastes in music and situation comedies differ from