Feeding Off the Past

The Evolution of the Television Rerun

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Up and down the dial, day and night, the television rerun glows as a rarely appreciated byproduct of mass culture. Within the television industry, however, the rerun is a product in and of itself. For more than four decades, the marketing and programming practices surrounding the rerun have evolved, first cautiously, then by aggressive leaps and bounds. The stories of the rerun's evolution form particularly revealing, and mostly unnoticed, chapters in the history of American television.

"No Sound Reason": Concept and Practice

As the new medium of television stood at the edge of exponential growth at mid-century, valuable precedents for repetition were provided by the film and radio industries. Hollywood, since Edison's day, had battled for profits along aggressive distribution and exhibition lines. This competition, waged among a handful of industry giants, was conducted on a weekly basis. Repeat audience attendance was desirable, but maintaining a constant flow of individual patrons week after week remained a greater priority.

From *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 21, no. 4, Winter 1994. Reprinted with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Published by Heldref Publications, 1319 Eighteenth St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-1802.

Until World War II, reissues were infrequent. As the supply from the studios ebbed during the war years, however, a small syndication industry appeared on Hollywood's perimeter. These companies met the demand of theatres searching to round out double features and Southern movie-houses, where twin bills had never flourished to the extent that they had elsewhere. Consequently, these films could be promoted as first-run products (Pryor B3; "Film Classics" 15). After the war, anti-trust decrees pushed the uncertain majors increasingly toward reissues as a means to supplement the continued decline in first-run product. In 1947, the entire industry released 53 reissues, 105 in 1948, and 136 in 1949 ("Box Score" 6; "Reissues Ease" 7).

Wartime exigencies also unleashed the possibility of sustained broadcast repetition in the radio industry. Programmers had had 16-inch disk recordings at their disposal since the dawn of the industry in the 1920s. Yet these program recordings were expensive, frequently marred by cracks and scratches, and—due to FCC requirements that such shows be identified as a transcription—thought to be anathema to audiences. The effective development and application of tape in Armed Forces Radio broadcasts promised to solve these difficulties and, indeed, the networks turned to magnetic tape recorders after the war.

Still, the transition was not immediate. ABC and Mutual began recording their broadcasts in 1946. CBS and NBC, fearing dead air mishaps, waited until 1948. ABC and NBC, also in 1948, were the first networks to opt for the new taping systems. These delays were partially attributable to the cost of taping machinery, which, unlike the actual tapes, remained formidable. More important, audience acquiescence to taped programming remained in doubt. Not until 1950 was the public's acceptance of the technology conventional wisdom within the industry. By that time, the ascendancy of television had thrown the established radio industry into disarray. The veterans of radio programming who flocked to the new medium brought a developed appreciation of taped broadcasts. Whether the broadcasts could be re-aired remained in doubt (Baughman, *The Republic* 67; "Disks Catch On" 68–69; "Transcription Boom" 58–59; "Tape" 52).

The issue, in fact, had been addressed a decade earlier before conflict relegated the nascent television industry to a dormant state. These observers adopted the existing logic of Hollywood: Television would be dependent upon filmed programming—and such programming could not be rerun. In a 1939 *Public Opinion Quarterly* piece, Jack Western argued, "Rarely does a moviegoer see a film more than once. There is no reason to believe that the looker will consent to see a telecine transmission more frequently. Afterwards, the film must be relegated to the vaults." A year later, NBC President Lenox R. Lohr echoed these concerns: "It appears to be inadvisable to broadcast most programs more than once. On the second broadcast, the audience is likely to become hypercritical and to lose interest" (qtd. in Boddy 67).

Despite earlier predictions, the industry, led by the networks, did not adopt filmed programming during its first explosive years. This was both a

measure of preference—film was viewed as having greater production costs—and necessity—the networks were not yet willing to strike deals with Hollywood. The result was the live programming, with each show airing 52 weeks of the year, that defined the medium's mischievous Golden Age.

It was also during this brief era that local stations enjoyed their most autonomous moments. The networks' daily schedules were limited, coaxial cables remained on the drawing board, and local advertisers proved eager sponsors of the new medium. One result of this relative freedom was the hours of cooking shows, talent showcases, and interview programs that were produced.

Another result—given the costs associated with the production of live programming—was a scramble by the stations for additional material. This product, the first influx of filmed programming into the medium, was supplied by the young television syndication industry. The role of Hollywood in the development of this industry—production units and aged stars flocking toward the networks as the film industry staved off Supreme Court rulings and witch hunts—has been well documented (Baughman, *The Republic* 77–90; Boddy 132–54). For the rerun's purpose, however, the resulting product and its applications deserve examination.

First, syndicators offered movie packages. Stations, as an analyst indicated in 1950, were particularly eager for Hollywood features: "The surest bet in television programming is sponsorship of Hollywood movies and westerns. No other category has consistently come up with such high ratings at such low cost" (Kugel 15). Until the mid-1950s, when lasting unions between the networks and Hollywood were struck, the flow of features consisted of badly dated efforts from lesser studios.

Battling to meet the expectations of hundreds of thousands of new TV sets, the quality of these films became something of a moot concern. Moreover, the supply was limited and, in bidding scrambles, a considerable strain was placed on even the healthiest station's budget. Almost immediately, local stations re-aired these features, pausing afterwards to provide justification. "Let's concede that television is in the fortunate position of finding itself the recipient of the products of an established medium and being able to adapt these for its own needs," stated Carol Levine, film supervisor of New York's powerful independent station WPIX in 1953. Levine's adaptive strategy was the station's First Show, an attractive movie aired Monday to Friday in the 7:30 to 9 P.M. time slot, with a fresh feature introduced each Wednesday. Ratings, she noted, had "shown a tendency not to suffer appreciably on reruns, and . . . the individual cost of each showing is considerably lower" (89).

In addition, syndicators marketed independently produced filmed series—the "westerns" that spellbound the 1950 insider—to the local stations. At this stage of the industry the syndication companies faced competition from the networks. As early as 1950, CBS had migrated "upstream" to produce series such as *Strange Adventure* and *The Gene Autry Show* for distribution (Kugel 16).

But the bulk of syndicated programs came from independent companies. Of these, Ziv Television Programs was the most successful. Ziv's success suggests that the burgeoning television syndication industry was as indebted to radio as it was to the film colony. Formed in 1937, Frederick W. Ziv Inc. boasted 24 programs on 850 radio stations, generating a gross of $10 million (a dollar amount questioned by competitors) when its founder decided to strike at television a decade later. Throughout the 1950s, Ziv rolled out one stock action half-hour program after another—*The Cisco Kid, Boston Blackie, Highway Patrol, Mr. District Attorney,* and *I Led Three Lives.* As an independent syndication company, Ziv needed a substantial capital outlay to begin operation, faced increasing production costs, and had to be aware of competition in pricing its products. As a result, the revenue generated by repeated showings quickly became necessary to earn a profit ("Transcription Boom" 58; "Millions" 44, 48–49; Moore).

Stations discovered—as they had with movies—that re-airing syndicated series did not necessarily equate with lost viewers and advertisers. *Television Magazine* answered its February 1954 article "Are Re-Runs a Good Buy?"

> There's no valid argument against the re-run concept, if the show is good and used properly. The record shows that it is possible for a return engagement program of almost any type to reach a sizable audience, comparable to that of high-rated network programming. (24)

The "record" received further support from the A. C. Nielsen Company. Surveying 254 repeat broadcasts from the 1953–1954 season, Nielsen concluded that the audience share dropped only 9 percent from the original broadcasts while the average minutes of viewing time fell 6 percent ("Nielsen" 30).

In assessing rating successes, industry insiders saw reruns as proof of the public's love affair with television. At times, especially from syndicators, the vision was an upbeat, if faintly sadistic one. Saul J. Turell, president of Sterling Television, stated in 1952, "We feel people not only can take an indefinite amount of film, but never tire of the same film, if it's good. One of ours, *Sandy,* has been shown in N.Y. alone 37 times, and the stations obviously are happy with it" ("Syndicated Film" 63). Others drew attention to the explosive demand for the medium. As early as 1950, distributor Robert D. Wolfe noted, "Running a film a year after its first run, the sponsor can reach millions who missed the first showing, or have bought their sets since then" ("Trend" 12). WPIX's Levine drew a comparison to a suddenly endangered Hollywood: "Reissues are money in the bank for movie production companies. There is no sound reason why the same principle cannot be applied to television" (93).

Network Summer: "Some People Just Have to Watch Television"

As regional programmers and their syndicated partners backed into programming repetition, the networks gravitated toward the economics of the

summer rerun. Production costs, especially for the favored live productions, became increasingly difficult to bear over a 52-week run. Quickly, 39 weeks of original programming became the norm, and the summer lull was mostly populated with less costly variety shows.

In a spirited defense of local programming, WSB-TV assailed this phenomenon in an advertisement in the 25 June 1951 issue of Broadcasting. Under the heading "No Summer Doldrums in Atlanta," the station reminded the potential advertiser: "The primary interest of WSB-TV is still audience . . . and lots of it. Despite the normal difficulties of summer programming (hiatuses, replacements, and replacement for replacements), WSB-TV has resisted the take-it-easy convenience of network scheduling." WSB's clients, instead of substandard network fare, were treated to locally produced programming (*Broadcasting* 67).

The networks countered such budding heresy. CBS and NBC launched "Operation Summer" in 1951 to retain sponsors. Rates were cut and NBC provided a brochure reporting that, for sponsors who stayed with the network through the 1950 summer, "an idle summer became a summer idyll" as "virtually all piled up more TV homes during the summer months than they had during the April, May and June just preceding" ("'Operation Summer'" 62).

"Operation Summer," however, proved an ineffective campaign. *Broadcasting* reported in its 13 August 1951 issue that "June marked the first sign of a summer decline in TV network billings comparable to the traditional summer slump of radio broadcasting" as the combined gross sales for the four networks fell from the May total of $10,011,144 to $8,996,940 ("June" 72).

Such numbers, and the growing suspicion that alliances with independent production facilities—if not the major studios—would prove more cost effective than the growing inflexibilities and expenses associated with live programming, provided the impetus to finally accept filmed programs. The direction was sensed by one analyst in the 10 September 1951 issue of *Broadcasting:* "While the networks continue to talk up live TV shows, the fact remains that they are in the foreground of film production, either present or future" (Glickman 94). Led by such sitcoms as *I Love Lucy* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet,* the movement toward film steadily progressed. By the 1956–1957 season, 44 percent of all network primetime programming was on film ("Now—More" 54). Four years later, the total stood at 83 percent (MacDonald 118).

Filmed programs were adaptable for virtually any programming needs. And, by the time *TV Guide* editorialized on the subject in September 1956, filmed reruns had replaced live replacement shows: "Not too many years ago the networks were using the summer months as a try-out time for different kinds of programs. Now they save their 'different' shows for their regular winter season." However, repeats or not, viewers remained glued to the set: "Some people just have to watch television and if only reruns are on, they watch reruns" ("As We See It" 2).

Film was still a rather rare commodity in the first years of the summer repetition. Many reruns were remnants from previous seasons. Highlighting the resurrection of ABC's failed 1956 sitcom *Hey, Jeanie,* CBS's 1959 summer flop *Peck's Bad Girl,* and the drab 1957 NBC play *Wedding Present* for the 1960 summer, *Newsweek* struck an already familiar chord: "'April is the cruelest month,' wrote T. S. Eliot, but obviously he never reckoned with television in June, July, and August. This TV summer is shaping up as a wasteland of stupefying familiarity . . . and . . . neither quality nor popularity necessarily has anything to do with the choice of revivals" ("Thirsty" 92).

Lacking competition and facing increasing production costs—the $50,000 cost of the average half-hour and the $100,000 cost for the average hour in 1960 doubled by 1973—deeper cuts occurred in original programming (Davidson 8). In 1960, the networks began to offer only 26 weeks of original programming. When, a dozen years later, this number fell to 22 or 24 weeks, the summer rerun inched into March.

Only the emergence of competition from cable and the Fox network forced the established networks to consider fewer reruns.[1] John Severino, ABC president, told *Broadcasting* in 1983, "We can't kid ourselves. We can't think we can go into summer reruns and still retain the audience" ("New Network" 35). Seven years later, Warren Littlefield, an executive vice president at NBC Entertainment, confessed to an industry gathering, "We've put crap on the air in the summer. That's got to change" ("Networks Promise" 52).

The networks were good to their promises. During the 1991–1992 season, reruns accounted for 17 percent of NBC's programming, 16 percent of ABC's, and 9 percent of CBS's (significantly, the young Fox network had the highest total at 26 percent). Specials had chipped away at the rerun base. CBS's share of such programming had risen to 31 percent (a figure inflated by the 1992 Winter Olympics and a seven-game World Series that helped the network win the season's rating sweepstakes) while specials accounted for 11 percent of NBC's slate, 10 percent of ABC's, and 8 percent of Fox's. Furthermore, the networks increasingly aired reruns in non-sweep periods outside the summer. In December 1991, for example, reruns accounted for 27 percent of the total programming for the four networks. In December 1982, this figure stood at only 4 percent. The number of original program episodes had rarely increased but, relegated to non-sweep periods and often preempted by specials, reruns began to disappear from the warmer months (especially in the sweep periods of May and July). The summer rerun had, slowly but steadily, become an endangered species ("Study Blames" 36; Mandese 54).[2]

The Impact of the Off-Network Strip

The American television viewer also became familiar with another brand of rerun in the mid-1950s: off-network strips, the showing of a previously broadcast network program five times a week in a particular time slot. It

appears that the first strip was *Amos 'n' Andy,* available to local stations in the fall of 1953 after concluding a two-year run on CBS (Ely 239–42; "Hot Market" 27). Another early off-network product was NBC's *My Little Margie.* After a three-year network run, Official Films began to market *Margie*'s 126 episodes in the fall of 1955. WPTZ, a Philadelphia independent looking to compete against CBS's strong daytime lineup, was one such buyer. The contract was for two-and-a-half years, allowing for five showings of each episode. Reporting on WPTZ's use of *Margie, Television Magazine* noted a "most satisfactory" initial return on the sponsors' investment and concluded, "The key to the economics of this daytime strip, as it is to the financing of all syndicated films, is the rerun. And as long as the rerun is delivering satisfactorily, the advertiser is getting a good buy" ("'Nighttime'" 77–78).

Strips took off. *Broadcasting,* surveying 60 markets, concluded that combined network and independent strips rose from 440.5 hours per week in 1956 to 800.5 hours per week in 1957 and to 1,070.5 hours per week in 1958 ("Syndicators Off" 162). Still, the real growth had not occurred. After only seven network programs totaling 423 half-hours were released for syndication in 1960, "the flood of 1961" brought 23 programs totaling 1,528 half-hours and 146 hours into the marketplace by July of that year ("Hot Market" 27). Before the pace finally slowed in 1964, 100 network programs hit the market in a five-year period ("Off-Network Scarcity" 52).

The impact was tremendous. The networks grabbed many of the most valuable commodities for their daytime programming, beginning a trend that introduced many of the best loved reruns. The most famous, *I Love Lucy,* first appeared in CBS's daytime schedule on 5 January 1957, where it ran for almost eight years before it was cast toward the open market (Simon 51).

For individual stations, especially the independents, the off-network strip was an even greater blessing. A network product, usually deemed a superior product, could grab a better time period, was more attractive as a proven product, and was more durable in reruns than a syndicated offering. More important, perhaps, the product existed. Unless a package contained approximately 100 half-hour episodes, the minimal optimal six-month run was impossible. Shorter, more frequent cycles, the stations had discovered, would usually exhaust both audience and advertiser ("Timebuying" 17).

For the syndicator of non-network programming, this was a considerable hurdle to pass. If fortunate enough to possess an adequate cache of episodes, the syndicator faced the equally difficult task of selling an increasingly unattractive product to a substantial number of markets to fully recoup production costs. Locked into this cycle, independent syndicators usually responded by cutting costs, falling further and further behind.

Therefore, as a 1961 Broadcasting survey indicated, a "virtual breakdown in new production for syndication" resulted ("Program Sources" 20). From a 1956 high of 29, the number of first-run series offered by independent syndicators plunged to six five years later with little indication that

the trend would be halted ("Hot Market" 27). On the other hand, network programming, now mostly produced by powerful Hollywood studios, survived by largely defining the industry's economies of scale. This network/studio alliance, and the reruns that it left in its wake, virtually destroyed the independent syndicator.

In addition to the syndicated product, the well of theatrical films, even as the vaults spilled open, was also running dry. In August 1956, *Broadcasting* estimated that half of the 12,000 to 14,000 old features had been released. Because television's appetite for these films was still increasing, it was noted that the source might be exhausted by 1962 ("Films for Fall" 40).

The journal was only slightly more optimistic five years later, predicting that the backlog would be "substantially" exhausted by the end of 1964 and completely exhausted by 1967 ("Will First-Run Films" 27). The networks, by that time, began to produce their own "TV movies." For individual stations, however, it was, as Albert Kroeger observed in the April 1964 *Television Magazine,* "a seller's market and distributors tell balky station buyers, 'Haven't you heard? There aren't any more movies behind this batch.' And they're right" (96).

As the supply of non-network syndicated programs and the first-run movie backlog evaporated, it was becoming increasingly difficult for individual stations to produce their own programming. Again, the industry's economies of scale were the deciding factor. Bernard Smith perceptively argued in a 1962 *Harper's* piece that:

> It is a fallacy to think of TV as chiefly a medium for "local" talent and interests. . . . Good TV programming is just too expensive for the resources of a single station, and it is getting costlier all the time. Nor will the local advertiser foot the bill. A local Chicago program, for instance, can reach less than 5 percent of TV homes in America. For it an advertiser will not pay more than 5 percent of what he would pay for a national network show.[29]

Although never abundant, quality local programming became the exception to the rule.

In the decade following the debut of *My Little Margie* on WPTZ, therefore, a hierarchical programming structure took firm root. At the peak was network programming—increasingly filmed and limited to half- hour sitcoms and hour-long westerns or adventure series. The networks netted the best of this material after its original run for their own use during the daytime and, after these shows lost their luster, they were released to individual stations where they were aired yet again. But most off-network shows went straight to the WPTZs of the dial where the rerun was no longer the hesitant, almost humble, force of the early 1950s. On the local level, the abundance and popularity of strips were quickly driving, either by direct competition or indirect opportunities, other forms of programming—syndicated non-network shows, movies, and local productions—from the playing field.

"Freezing the Wasteland"

Few moments capture the essence of the New Frontier more convincingly than FCC Chairman Newton Minow flaunting the sins of television's "vast wasteland" at the podium of the 39th Annual Convention of the National Association of Broadcasters on 2 March 1961. For several years, a flow of indictments from disgruntled postwar liberals, an increasingly disenchanted viewing public, and those displaced by the industry's film wave had been targeted at the medium. [3] Minow's rallying call to arms led aspirations for a richer and more informative medium into uncharted areas of federal regulation. As the FCC moved forward on two fronts to improve first-run programming, the promises inherent in greater competition quickly cemented the hierarchical programming structure and the reruns that largely defined it for the next two decades.

A day before his speech to the NAB, Minow spoke to John Bartlow Martin of the *Saturday Evening Post:*

> We're only using twelve channels, Two through Thirteen. We could use thirty more, the ones in the ultrahigh frequency band. It's the only way to increase competition in television. If we used the ultrahigh frequencies, you might have ten or twelve stations in Chicago instead of four. (Martin 64)

The history of UHF television had taken a decisive turn when, during the closing months of World War II, the FCC froze the development of UHF channels until 1953. When the freeze was lifted, only a third of all televisions produced in the United States could receive UHF signals. Consequently, many of the stations that set up shop past channel 13 after the freeze hoping to lure audiences away from the network affiliates and established independents of the VHF spectrum faced an uphill battle for survival. Within two years 123 of these stations folded and the number of televisions that could tune in UHF fell to 15 percent ("Hopes Fade" 27). By the time the 1962 All-Channel Act requiring all domestic televisions to have UHF capabilities was passed, there were 85 UHF stations in operation and five million of the 55 million sets in the U.S. could receive such signals ("TV Trade" 40).

Two years after the "wasteland" speech, Minow, claiming that "the time has come for more than speeches," again addressed the NAB convention. While a UHF dial, under the terms of the All-Channel Act, would not be mandatory on sets produced in the United States until 30 April 1964, Minow saw a number of roles it could play. These included an educational network, a system of pay TV, and a base for a fourth network. He also envisioned a relationship between "first-run" VHF network affiliates and "second-run" affiliates on the UHF dial. The first-run stations would air original network programming; the UHF second-run stations would allow the public "a second chance to see the best the networks have to offer" and a scattering of foreign programming. Moreover, in such a system, advertisers unable to afford network fees could find a new source, program costs could be more

effectively amortized, and producers could receive additional rerun fees ("Minow Proposes" 60).

Minow's salesmanship was effective. *Broadcasting* reported that the growth of UHF stations had been "the single brightest development in the syndication industry" in 1966, as their total sales had quadrupled since 1965 and grown to 10 percent of the total domestic syndicated market ("U's Newest" 31). There were 265 UHF stations by the end of the decade and 60 percent of all sets could tune them in ("UHF Band" 61). A number of these stations provided bilingual, public affairs, and quality foreign programming. Also, the UHF dial served as a friendly habitat for struggling educational channels. The majority of these new stations, however, veered toward the second-run path, using off-network reruns and syndicated film packages to fill most of their programming day. The base of the hierarchical programming structure had been widened considerably, creating more demand for the off-network product.

The discrepancy between Minow's original vision of UHF and the vaster wasteland that it largely led to illustrates the ineffectiveness of the FCC as a means to an end of better television in the early 1960s. One obstacle was the holdover commissioners from the Eisenhower years who represented a daunting majority. This bloc, Minow quickly discovered, would support rulings that forwarded increased competition as a solution to the industry's programming shortcomings but balked at any direct interventions by the federal government. Also, haunted by the agency's fumbling of the UHF question in the early 1950s, the entire commission was tentative and inconsistent in its efforts a decade later (Baughman, *Television's Guardians* 153–59).

But, in fact, Minow's FCC was largely unconcerned with reruns and, insofar as they prospered in the wake of the agency's actions, their growing role in American television. Nowhere in the "wasteland" address did the chairman allude to reruns. Rather, in an era of quiz show scandals, hordes of derivative westerns, and fewer and fewer "quality" efforts such as *See It Now* and *Omnibus,* Minow had captured the essence of existing criticism in damning the networks. Building tangible regulatory legislation from this base was not only unpalatable to the entrenched Eisenhower appointees but a policy of initiating showdowns with corporate America was unlikely to gain approval in Camelot. Consequently, Minow's vision of increased competition was one of promise: Prisoners to an unimaginative programming hierarchy in the short run, it was possible that, in the long run, the young UHF stations could gain firm financial footing and pose an alternative from below.

The FCC also began to struggle with the question of how much involvement the networks should have "downstream" in the syndication market. As early as 1957, the agency issued studies concerning the vertical reach of ABC, CBS, and NBC. When concrete proposals came in 1965, the networks promptly joined forces to counter the threat. First, they claimed that their share of the syndicated market amounted to only 12 percent of the total, down from 25 percent in 1958 ("In Defense" 33). Second, they

launched a prolonged legal campaign to protect what *Broadcasting* called "an estimated $30 million-a-year bonanza" ("$30-Million Plum" 26). The networks staved off the threat until 1 June 1973. By then CBS, considerably more involved in the syndicated market than ABC or NBC, had created a corporate spin-off, Viacom, to handle the network's syndication and fledgling cable efforts.[4] In 1971, its first year, Viacom pulled in almost $21 million in revenue from these two sources, a figure that increased eightfold by 1980 ("Viacom" 32).

With the onset of the Reagan deregulatory revolution, the FCC, under the captaincy of Mark Fowler, moved to strike the syndication rulings from the books. Again, legal action and lobbying ground legislation to a halt. A break came in 1991 when a U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that the law was unconstitutional and, after yet several more delays, the networks were allowed, on 1 April 1993, to reenter the syndication market (Jessell 7, 10).

Convoluted even by FCC standards, the push to remove the networks from the syndication market had a great impact on the development of the rerun. Although they could, and did, pressure producers to grant them distribution rights, the networks' first priorities were ratings and advertising revenues.[5] Whether a program remained on the air long enough to prove attractive as a product for off-network stripping was, at best, a secondary concern.[6] In fact, a quickening of cancellations in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the face of competition from other programming sources contributed to a crucial drought in the off-network market.

For the producers who capitalized on the FCC's rulings against the networks, the length of a program's run on the networks was the greatest of concerns. The production of network programming was, and remains, a deficit-financed operation. Broadcast fees from the networks covered only part of production costs. Reruns brought a break-even point or, if the program enjoyed a lengthy network run, profits as stations would eagerly bid for a popular series with enough episodes to ensure successful stripping.[7] Large producers, such as Universal and Paramount, or independent syndication companies, if the producer lacked the resources to follow operations downstream, were left to scavenge fiercely as the networks weathered and then fell to the FCC's fire.

The insights of those who occupied the industry's trenches reveal what was at stake as the FCC began to fumble with the UHF and syndication dilemmas. Several months after Minow's indictment of the networks, *Broadcasting* surveyed industry leaders for their opinions of the crossroads where American television had arrived:

"If we have a wasteland in television programming now," said one station executive, "then what we're doing is freezing the wasteland for a long time to come." Another put the same thought in this way: "What we're doing is perpetuating the 'sameness' in television programming and stretching it out over a longer period of time. If a western is taken off the network and put into syndication and then is replaced on the network by a new western, what you have is summer reruns 40 times over." ("Program Sources" 20)

As the off-network programming chokehold continued, such prognoses became more pessimistic. In the aforementioned 1964 Kroeger piece, Jay Faragan, program director and film buyer for WFLA Tampa, reckoned that, of the rerun cycle, "The audience will get used to it and we'll get by with it—for a while, but without a doubt we're going to have to come up with something new." Samuel S. Carey, holding the same positions at WRVA Richmond, warned, "The end of the road is coming on rerunning reruns . . . shows like *My Little Margie,* run in local time for years, are wearing out. Once they could maintain most of the audience, but no more" (Kroeger 102–4).

"I'd Sell My Soul for a Half-Hour"

Audiences and stations were, however, increasingly locked into a rerun cycle as FCC actions led to the crystallization of the hierarchical programming structure. Network programming had not been improved and the syndication industry broke from the gate at a breakneck pace that has not diminished to this day. It is this competitive force that has defined the rerun's role in television over the last three decades.

Immediately after the flood of off-network programs glutted the market in the early 1960s, the flow slowed to a trickle. After 30 shows hit the market in 1963, only 19 became available in 1964 and 12 in 1965 ("Syndicators Confident" 68; "Off-Network Bonanza" 25). Although the number rose again in 1966—with 22 shows offered—variances of supply in this era were exacerbated by other factors ("Syndicators Have" 100). Residual payments increased as the Screen Actors Guild contracted concessions from the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers during union/industry showdowns and as actors, writers, and directors with the greatest leverage independently struck even more costly payment schedules ("Those TV Reruns" 62; "Color Tones Up" 69). Also, starting in 1966, syndicators began to scramble for color off-network programs as the American viewer began to demand the fruits of this long-awaited breakthrough ("Color Tones Up" 69).

With quality color products a scarcity, contingency selling became the norm. Richard Wollen, vice president of programming of Metromedia Television, introduced this strategy in 1967. Seeking to purchase top-notch off-network products for the stations under the Metromedia umbrella, he grabbed *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* and *Mission Impossible* while the shows were in the midst of their network run. The latter was an especially risky move because the show had only been on the air for 10 weeks. As Wollen told *Television Magazine* a year later: "If *Mission* had run only one season I would have had my neck out. . . . But my instincts told me it was too good to run only one season. I just figured this thing has got to be a barn burner and it's going

to run at least two years and maybe four" ("What Stations Want" 63). Six years later, Wollen's gamble bore fruit and Metromedia's stations, rather than their competitors, possessed the program for stripping.

Contingency selling, however, threatened to dampen the appetite of stations. In waiting for a program to conclude a lengthy network run before picking up rerun rights, datedness might offset the show's popularity with viewers. An ingenious solution was not long in appearing. In 1973, Louis Friedland, chairman of MCA's syndication efforts, as *Forbes* told the story five years later, had a bright idea. Why not, he reasoned, take a series while it was going strong on the network and sell its reruns for a definite delivery date in the future? "Before, stations didn't get a shot at a show until it had been publicly executed," says Friedland. "They were prepared to pay much more for something that might still be punching it out when they got it." (Jaffee 98) Thus, *Happy Days, M*A*S*H, All in the Family,* and *Laverne & Shirley* led the way in what Forbes concluded had become "a true futures market in this most volatile of entertainment commodities" (Jaffee 98).

For individual stations, the risks, now dictated by the possibility of an early cancellation, increased accordingly. Production companies, seeking to offer a safer product and combat a new off-network drought in the early 1980s, responded in a twofold manner. First, in 1983, the production runs of two canceled network shows with only 63 episodes apiece, *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort,* were continued. Revenues were quickly garnished from both selling the first-run property and by marketing a larger, and thus more attractive, package for stripping ("How Independents" 62). Second, larger companies, as Paramount did with *Family Ties* and *Cheers,* began to guarantee—for which they extracted a surcharge from stations—a certain number of episodes. If the networks canceled such programs, they would follow *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort* into non-network production runs ("The World of TV" 55). Yet, no less than they had been in the early 1950s with an independent product, local stations were as resourceful as their syndicator partners in molding the off-network strip as a programming tool. On the networks, such programs had been primetime entities molded by the nobility of American mass culture—network executives and Hollywood producers—with the aggressive intent to grab the attention of advertisers by capturing the loyalties of the public. On their off-network run, the appeal of these programs to advertisers was far more powerful than the cartoons and unsophisticated syndicated programs they replaced ("Off-Network Bonanza" 26).

Therefore, in an ironic turn consistent with Minow's aspirations for the UHF dial, increased dependence on the off-network rerun provided an opening for independent stations to make a bid for the entire adult market. After solidifying the hierarchical programming structure, the rerun emerged as a threat to its health. Specifically, this threat was counterprogramming: the running of attractive off-network strips by independents in the early fringe period (5 to 7:30 P.M., 5 to 8 after 1971 when the FCC forced the networks to give the 7:30 to 8 slot back to their affiliates) to compete with the network news and other non-primetime programming of the affiliates.

An NBC study of the early 1980s traced the damage that counterprogramming inflicted upon its affiliates. From a 7.4 share in 1971, the average UHF independent's early fringe ratings rose to a 13.5 share in 1982 ("Independent TV" 26).[8] In 1981, Bud Hirsch, a vice president in NBC's sales division, told New York that, in the nation's largest market, "The independents, predominantly WNEW and WPIX, keep growing every season, and I'm worded. . . . They are mainly successful now in the 6-to-8 P.M. slot, when they can program reruns of *M*A*S*H* or *Laverne & Shirley* against local and network news. We just can't compete with independents in that period" (Nobile 26).

Advertising revenues followed the ratings. In 1972, for the first time, the average UHF channel turned a profit ("UHF" 35). All independents earned a combined $7 million in profits in 1973; by 1977 the amount leapt to $131 million (Jaffee 98). In 1984 there were 193 independents, twice the number of 1979 ("Happy Days" 74).

In this wildly competitive environment the price of the off-network product rocketed. When *I Love Lucy* first became available to local stations in 1967, WNEW paid just over $4,300 per episode (Jaffee 98).[9] WPIX, in 1976, paid $35,000 for each episode of *Happy Days* (Mariani 27). Two years later, 33-year-old Randy Reiss, a vice president for domestic syndication at Paramount, launched the *Laverne & Shirley* campaign. Labeled "one of those upwardly mobile types whose nervous stomach could no longer accommodate 16-ounce steaks at expensive Manhattan restaurants" by *TV Guide,* Reiss knew that the show would be especially desirable to stations seeking to take on competitors who had snatched up *Happy Days* (Mariani 27). The show was also powerful enough to become a station's "hooker spot," forcing advertisers to buy packages that included time for less-attractive spots in addition to the precious *Laverne & Shirley* presence. Reiss set the minimum bid at $50,000 for New York stations; other markets, as is the case with syndication sales, would bid after this benchmark had been set. WPIX outbid its New York rivals, purchasing the show for $54,000 per episode, while KTLA earned Los Angeles rights for $61,000 per half-hour (Mariani 30).

The ideal counterprogramming product is maneuverable and capable of appealing to a wide demographic viewer base. Sitcoms, at half the length of the hour-long drama and more easily digested by young adults, had long since been established as the staple of the syndication market by the time Reiss leapt to proto-Yuppie fame. Yet, led by the success of *Dallas* and *Hill Street Blues* and the demise of mainstay half-hour comedies, the networks swung toward hour-long dramas while producers and critics pronounced the sitcom to be dead as a network entity.

The effect on the off-network market was not difficult to gauge: Syndicators and local stations knew that only a single network sitcom would be available in both 1985 (*Gimme a Break*) and 1986 (*Facts of Life*). Putting

canceled programs such as *Too Close for Comfort* and *It's a Living* on non-network syndication runs was, at best, a minimal response to the drought. The development of first-run syndicated material as an alternative to the entrenched rerun was an obvious solution, but the products that rolled off the assembly line were painfully weak. Of *Small Wonder,* a landmark pilot produced in 1984 by a consortium of five of the industry's largest station groups, one wag noted: "All those brains and they come up with a show about an 8-year-old girl who's a robot?" (Rosenthal 44). Thoroughly mediocre, by both aesthetic and ratings yardsticks, the scarce off-network sitcoms went for top dollar (*Gimme a Break* fetched a top price of $77,000). The mood of the industry was captured by a chief programmer from a major station group: "I'd sell my soul for a half-hour" ("Off Network Sitcoms" 34).

Then what *TV Guide* called the "most shamelessly arrogant exercise in hardball salesmanship the television industry had ever seen" was launched to sell *The Cosby Show* (Hill, "The Cosby Push" 3). The show was marketed as having a "halo" effect: so popular that programs in surrounding time periods would gain and retain *Cosby* viewers. It was also sold as having a "halo" effect: bids set so high that stations could only hope to offset the costs with heightened advertiser interest in the surrounding programs. A Machiavellian marketing campaign stressed that, whatever the costs, non-*Cosby* stations would be at the mercy of competitors who possessed the program. Furthermore, Viacom demanded a minute of the six-and-half minutes of advertising (during its network run, the program had four-and-half minutes of advertising space—editing more ad space into a rerun was an established practice) for its own use. Barter deals had been commonly struck for first-run independent programming; *Cosby,* however, represented the first application of this practice for an off-network product. When the feeding frenzy of bidding passed, barter time generated approximately $100 million of the $600 to $650 million of revenue from the Cosby sale ("Cosby" 76). New York's superstation WOR-TV submitted the top bid, $350,000 an episode ("The 'Cosby' Numbers" 58).

Dénouement and Rebirth

Cosby's ratings in syndication did not, in the eyes of industry analysts, justify its price. Nor did it have a significant "halo" effect ("Mixed Results" 38; Hill, "*Cosby* Reruns" 32). The boom market in independent stations, fueled by FCC rulings allowing more stations to be owned by individual companies and easier sales of stations within the industry, went belly up in 1987 as several dozen went into Chapter 11 or were incorporated into the Home Shopping Network (Grillo 64; Cray 44). If there was any room for hope for the independents in the post-*Cosby* era, it was, as Jean Bergantini Grillo scolded in a January 1988 *Channels* piece, that they "have studied the primer on how not to run a station that they helped write during their wild expansion and painful contraction over the past few years" (Grillo 64).

One of the chief lessons was to avoid deadly bidding wars for off-network programs. "*Cosby* told us how to say 'no,'" observed Rick Lowe, general manager of KOKI, Fox's Tulsa outpost (Heuton 37). Such discipline, and the fruits of the resurrected sitcom, drove prices down for syndicated material. For example, whereas *Cosby* went for $100,000 an episode in the Detroit market, *Perfect Strangers* was bought for less than $20,000 and *ALF* for less than $30,000 ("Sitcoms" 36).

Also, Lowe and other station managers could shed their independent status and align themselves with the Fox network. Although Fox shows eventually flowed down the programming hierarchy—witness *Married . . . With Children*—the network offered a source of first-run material that had proved so elusive during the previous three decades. First-run material also began to blossom in the form of dramas such as *Baywatch* and a new wave of talk shows. Furthermore, there was the appeal of products produced by individual stations. Greg Nathanson, general manager of KTLA, told *Broadcasting* in 1993: "I think our whole future is in local programming . . . when we run a movie or an off-network sitcom, even though we run a lot and we're very successful with it, every cable system, every USA Network or Nickelodeon can bring you rerun programming" ("To Live and Program" 74).

Nathanson's cable examples are especially relevant to the present and future state of the rerun. USA led the way in pulling recent off-network strips away from individual stations, adding *Riptide* to its schedule in 1986, *Miami Vice* in 1987, and—in the first case of a cable network acquiring a network ranked in the top 10—*Murder, She Wrote* in 1988 (Brown 26; "USA Network" 45; "'*Murder, She Wrote*'" 102). For syndicators this trend helped to salvage some of the costs associated with the largely unwanted off-network hour-long drama in an era of sitcom demand, but not always enough to put a show in the black. *Miami Vice,* for example, cost MCA Inc. a reported $1.3 million per episode to produce, of which $850,000 was covered by the license fee paid by NBC. The USA deal did not cover the $450,000 deficit. This, in turn, led MCA and other companies away from the production of hour-long dramas, especially those that were particularly topical and expensive ("USA Network" 46).

In 1985, Nickelodeon judged its evening slate of children's programming expendable, opted for a slate of network relics, and launched its Nick at Nite programming (Schneider B22). The decision coincided with the appearance of "evergreen" divisions within several nervous syndication companies scavenging for products in the midst of the drought of recent off-network strips. Individual stations and superstations have continued to snap up dated shows—often, given the cost of the most attractive strips and the need to flesh out a programming schedule, out of necessity ("New Life" 54–59). Nonetheless, Nick at Nite has arguably cornered the market of vintage reruns.

A long-standing relationship with the nostalgic consciousness of the American viewing public has carved a broad swath through the rerun's his-

tory. The recycling of movies in the 1950s—in particular B Westerns and the *Little Rascals* and *Three Stooges* series—attracted both younger audiences and the adults who had flocked to the theaters in the days before television.[10] In the mid-1970s, a wave of programs from the 1950s such as *The Mickey Mouse Club* and *You Bet Your Life* grabbed both ratings and the attention of the media (Doan 10; "Second Childhood" 48). *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch,* although perennial rerun success stories, enjoyed renaissances of sorts in, respectively, the early 1980s and early 1990s (Friedman 18–21; Stengal 76; Briller 13–20).

It is difficult to imagine, however, a friendlier habitat for the rerun than Nick at Nite. Through its clean-cut promotional jingles the rerun itself is exalted and the viewer's memories of dusty UHF dens and a family's summertime bewilderment with *TV Guide* listings are affectionately coddled. For example, before being dethroned by Dick Van Dyke, Dr. Will Miller served as Nick at Nite's chairman, providing soothing psychological insights into the viewer's relationship with programs being viewed for the umpteenth time. Gilligan's failed efforts to leave his island are attributable to his reluctance to leave the stranded community, no more than the viewer can abandon yet another escapade of coconuts and gorillas. Meanwhile, in-house giggles follow the bottom line: Reruns helped to boost Nickelodeon's advertising revenues to $78.5 million in 1991, an increase of 34 percent from the previous year (Winski S-2).

But the secret of Nick at Nite's success would seem to lie more in the atomization of American television in the age of cable than in the average viewer's sophisticated appreciation of postmodern camp. Traditionally, whimsical mid-life crises equated only partial rerun success. Unless younger viewers were also attracted, a rerun would wither on the dial. DLT Entertainment's recent marketing campaign for the "new" *Three's Company* illustrates this objective in no uncertain terms:

> So why do we call it new? Because every season *THREE'S COMPANY*'s audience completely re-generates itself! *THREE'S COMPANY* and *MASH* are the only two sitcoms to stay on the top 10 syndication sitcom list for 29 consecutive sweeps!
>
> That's why. . . . For 20 million teenagers, *THREE'S COMPANY* is this season's newest hit!
> For 68 million young adults, it's still their all time favorite program!
> For 36 million kids, every episode is first run!
> That's why we call it new! (*Channels* 67)

For Nickelodeon this concern is largely a secondary one. Aiming for a specific niche—movies, music videos, news, sporting events and summaries, cartoons and comedians, infomercials and shopping marketplaces—few cable channels bother to submit a full week's, or a full day's, worth of original programming. Instead, they seek a minimal hold on a targeted audience to attract enough local and national advertisers to offset this selected and cost-effective programming. Thus the feasibility of Nick at Nite.

And thus, the art form saluted by Nickelodeon is wildly embraced by its cable brethren. Constant, albeit increasingly specialized, repetition flows from the modern American TV set. Conspiring is the viewer, armed with remote control and a VCR, an independent programmer free to finicky repeat at will. Tom Shales, in labeling the 1980s "The Re Decade," provided a definitive encapsulation of a future that has come to pass:

> With so many more channels out there, we are more than ever before feeding off the work of the past. We are even more parasitical of the past, and the past is more easily accessed than ever. We're accessin' it like crazy, all the time; you can get a fix of yesterday at almost any hour of the day and night, whereas it's not quite so easy to get a fix on, or a fix of, Right Now, This Minute. (72)

In this expanding environment, delineations on the rerun continuum fade. Summer reruns dissipate across the calendar. Off-network strips seep from traditional UHF havens into one cable outpost after another. A fresh wave of repetition foams about these products of postwar mass culture as they gradually melt into the concept that they began to define some 40 years ago. The reverence shown to the rerun by Dr. Miller and his cohorts is wholly fitting. After an elusive trek through our television heritage, the rerun basks in its blinding, omnipresent triumph.

Acknowledgment

The author is indebted to Professor Randy Roberts of the Department of History at Purdue University for his assistance and encouragement with this study.

Notes

1. An ineffective flurry of presidential interest in summer reruns, however, emanated from the 1972 Nixon re-election campaign in its efforts to court Hollywood unions dissatisfied with residual payments for rebroadcasts. See "Don't Play It Again," *Newsweek* 25 Sept. 1972: 105; "The Rerun Syndrome," *Time* 2 Oct. 1972: 63; Peter Funt, "Are Viewers Getting the Old Rerun-Around?" *TV Guide* 1 Feb. 1975: 2–5.

2. In 1972, *Broadcasting* estimated that 44.8 percent of CBS's schedule consisted of reruns, 42.2 percent of NBC's, and 36 percent of ABC's ("The Realities of Reruns in Network TV," *Broadcasting* 2 Oct. 1972: 15). Although this study included reruns of theatrical films and the study two decades later ignored such repeats, choosing instead to include them in the "specials" category, the rerun share had clearly diminished.

3. For detailed analysis of this criticism, see Baughman's "The National Purpose and the Newest Medium: Liberal Critics of Television, 1958–60," *Mid-America* 64 (1982): 41–55.

4. ABC's spinoff, Worldvision, was in place by 1972, as was NBC's NTA.

5. For a discussion of the tactics and results of such network intrusions see A. Frank Reel, *The Networks: How They Stole the Show* (New York: Charles Scribner's

Sons, 1979): 125–27. For a rare insight into the hegemonic reach of the networks from an industry insider during the initial FCC/network clashes, see independent producer Don McGuire's "Another View on 50-50 Rule," *Broadcasting* 7 Mar. 1966: 34+.

6. A noted example: Todd Gitlin's description of Lou Grant's demise in *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1985): 3–11.

7. Producers also depend upon foreign sales. This was especially true before the massive rise of off-network products and the increased production capabilities and programming protectionism of other nations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See "World Laps Up U.S. TV Fare," *Business Week* 23 Apr. 1960: 129–131; Ross Drake, "From Daniel Boone to Mod Squad," *TV Guide* 29 Apr. 1972: 33–36.

8. The study also concluded that the late fringe strategy of placing local newscasts versus the final primetime hour also led to substantial ratings gains.

9. Until the 1980s, the terms of a rerun purchase allowed each episode to be aired six times within a given time period.

10. An interesting analysis of the beginnings of the Stooges' revival may be found in "Out of Vault, Into Limelight," *Broadcasting* 16 Feb. 1959: 62.

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