

PROGRAM PROMOTION ON THE INTERNET

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In July 1999, Martin Polon wrote: "The whole point of a website is to increase viewer loyalty to your station and its services, thus counteracting declining numbers for network television." This goal for using the internet to promote local audiences has grown over years of web design developments, for both radio and television stations. From a simple listing and a few links, the local broadcast station's presence on the internet has flourished into a sophisticated promotion tool. Broadcast audiences can use the internet to find content (audio and video) that they missed on-air, tied to conventional broadcast programming that they are more likely to watch on-air in the future.

Although the literature on the internet is already enormous and swelling daily, very little has been published--online or on paper--about media promotion via the web. But the issue is important because trade reports suggest that as many as 84 million adults in the United States have accessed online services in 1999 (IntelliQuest, 1999), up from 66 million adults the previous year. As a result of technological convergence, the web is changing quickly, and there is a need to measure its present form to understand and perhaps influence its changes. As Bucy, Lang, Potter, and Grabe (1998) report, much of the research about the industry has been conducted by commercial services and is proprietary or has been qualitative and anecdotal in nature. Aside from the many studies of such phenomena as bulletin boards and news groups (see, for example, James, Wotring, & Forrest, 1985), surveys of online media sites tend to be broad and to disregard program promotion or subsume it within analyses of much larger units of a media company's entire web. The availability of news content on station websites has become a focus area for a few studies (e.g., Niekamp, 1996, and Rosales & Pitts, 1997). Kiernan and Levy (1999)

examined journalistic competition among websites and found no relationship between site characteristics and competition. Advertising and e-mail have been of particular interest (see Aikat, 1995; Niekamp, 1996), and only a very few studies look at online promotion of programs--although there are a great many online comments (see <http://www.promolounge.com>).

Yet in creating audience size, the primary function of program promotion, is one of the forces driving broadcast and cable networks to utilize the web at the present time.

Nowadays, three areas of online media promotion can be identified: web pages that promote individual television programs or station lineups; web pages that promote media companies, such as NBC's or Time Warner's online sites or those of individual local television and radio stations; and web pages that promote new forms of entertainment--comparable to television programs--on the web itself. Because the last of these barely exists yet and few generalizations could be drawn, and because the first topic is covered elsewhere, this paper concentrates on program promotion by stations via the web.

Although scholars such as Bucy, et al. (1998) ask whether the capabilities of the web are being fully exploited in media sites, the larger underlying issue about web promotion is whether the television channel model for media content is really applicable to the internet. Broadcasters seek to buy their way into the future (via mergers, buyouts, joint operating agreements, and so on), but it is not clear what the future is. Are thousands of web-age "channels" really comparable to the broadcast/cable model of dozens of channels? This question was posed in a cover story on measuring advertising on web sites (Internet World, 1998). It follows that the attributes of web pages promoting programs may need to differ from the attributes of print and on-air promotion.

Just as Rank (1991) and other authors of advertising texts lay out the primary strategies and tactics of persuasion in advertising, in similar fashion, Eastman, Ferguson, and Klein (1999) spell out the primary practices and strategies of promotion by broadcasters and cable operators. But whether these strategies and tactics fit the online world is an open question. In one key case study, Wolfe (1997) recounted NBC's history of web promotion and concluded that web use has matured, and that web users expect sophistication in design and have little tolerance for such things as errors or delays in page updates.

McClung (1997) re-analyzed a sample of television station web sites and concluded that their self-representation was both inadequate and misleading. Murphy (1998) looked at radio web sites and attempted to assess their value as promotional tools. In addition, Bates and King (1996) and Bates, Chambers, Emery, Jones, McClung, & Park (1997) have examined local television stations' use of the web, including how the viewing of programs can be promoted. But the most useful study to date comes from Bucy, et al. (1998) because it analyzes some of the design and promotional characteristics of media web sites. It provides a model for future research of more selective pages of media web sites, and is adapted here to examine program promotion on the web.

After reviewing in detail the limited literature regarding online promotion of programs and stations via the internet, I plan to analyze the content of a sample of 290 television station web sites, including their use of links to broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN, WB, and PBS). The focus will be on pages in each website that promote specific television programs, not on pages that provide generic lineup information or background material on the station's history

or management, talent or technology. The methodology and attributes will draw on Bucy et al. (1998), Bates & King (1996), Niekamp (1996), and Bates, Chambers, et al. (1997). Specifically, content analysis will count the number of screens and frame for each website, the number of photographs, text units, full-motion video, and merchandise. Analysis will also focus on design attributes such as the use of background colors, the warmth or coolness of colors, animation, linking text, and degree of scrolling, as well as interactive features such as feedback and e-mail directly related to the programmer.

The results of this analysis will be collapsed into categories that can be compared to the findings of previous research. This analysis assesses the sophistication of the parts of station web sites devoted to programs--which may be the part that draws most users (see Ferguson, 1999) and has the most promotional value for stations. Finally, this paper will examine the degree to which internet promotion of programs is akin to traditional print and on-air promotion of shows, and in what ways is it similar and dissimilar. This study should lay a foundation for subsequent research and provide a snapshot of how stations 1999 are adapting multimedia to an old-fashioned one-to-many model of media communication, at least in terms of marking and promotion. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the issues and methodological problems ahead in scholarly research into online program promotion with the goal of encouraging more disinterested academic research in this area.

A review of previous findings

The original studies are far richer in detail than outlined below, but the summary information presented here is tailored to the questions sought by the present study. Even so,

interesting or salient findings are also reported in many cases.

As Table 1 shows, page length is getting shorter and the use of multiple frames is declining. Simplification of web sites is addressing the needs of the user. At the same time, websites are growing only slightly in sheer size. Bates and King (1996) found an average 54 pages per site; the present study using 1999 data uncovered 56 pages per site.

With regard to number of screens, comparisons are difficult. Bates and King (1996) reported a median and a mode but not an average. Fortunately, a subsequent analysis of the same data (McClung, 1997) filled in the average. Also, the browser settings affect the number of screens displayed on a site with vertical scrolling content.

Table 2 summarizes the use of photographs and linked item in past and present research. Both studies by Bates use subcategories (e.g., small photo, medium photo, large photo) that defy direct comparisons, but the trend is toward more photographs. This coincides with effective promotional practice: Display advertisements with photographs attract more attention. Faster servers and computer connections will facilitate greater use of photographic elements in the future.

The use of multiple links seems to have peaked in 1997. Nowadays, station sites strive to simplify the promotional message. Researchers have noted that "less is more" with regard to web page design (Eastman, 1999). Limiting the length of scrolling pages and cutting back on text has proven to be an effective way of creating an uncluttered web site.

Table 3 summarizes the use of movement on web pages. The data show a strong trend toward increased animation and video. The simple eye-catching device of blinking text is an

effective technique, if not overused. Although the present study gave wide interpretation to the definition of blinking and animation, it limited the concept of video (counted as either archived or real-time in previous studies) strictly to real-time streaming. Even so, four out of five sites in the 1999 study took advantage of browser features (e.g., RealVideo) that allow streaming video.

Table 4 reports the percentage of pages (or stations) that use interactive communication with the audience. The reporting in the two different studies by Bates uses each page as the unit of analysis to one should take care making comparisons. Even so, getting feedback from the viewers and listeners is crucial to the promotional effort -- and it is changing the way broadcasters conceive their programming service to audiences. With interactivity, stations can tailor their messages, including those that promote programs. As shown in Table 4, e-mail remains the most simple form of two-way communication, but newer forms of real-time interactivity (e.g., chat rooms) are becoming more popular by the end of the decade.

Table 5 summarizes the paucity of data on the use of particular sources of promotion: local, syndicated and national. Previous research did collect information on the use of program schedules and station logos, but none of the studies counted the instances of local program promotion. The 1999 data used in the present study suggest that local promotion is quite prevalent (probably not much different from earlier). As network sites become more sophisticated, stations are more likely to link to (or even be subsumed by) the national effort. Until 1998, ABC affiliates in particular had no network-originated umbrella service like NBC.com. NBC was an early adopter of web sites and continues a high level of sophistication. CBS and Fox were quick to follow, and the WB site has strongly challenged the big networks

while easily outperforming the UPN and Pax pages. All of the Big-3 networks were busy in the late-1990s acquiring internet services and becoming web portals (e.g., ABC's go.com and NBC's snap.com).

It should not be assumed that all of the "network" stations exploiting the internet are from commercial broadcasters, but most of them are. The 1999 data show that three out of four stations tout their networks' programs, while the figures broken out for PBS stations show that only about half (48.5 percent) promote shows from the network. (Further detail on which shows are promoted is presented below in the Results section of the present study.)

Method

A systematic random sample was used for the present study, conducted in February and March 1999. The sampling frame was a complete list of all U.S. television stations, including translator frequencies. The list came from the FCC web site (www.fcc.org) as a binary file representing an Excel spreadsheet of station frequency assignments for digital television (HDTV). Every fifth listing was marked from a random starting point and a sample of 291 stations was generated, of which 179 had websites. Coders were recruited from a class of 33 senior-level students familiar with broadcasting research, with each student examining the web sites for up to ten stations.

The original FCC database listed only the channel number and the city of license. Stations were located using <http://www.ultimatetv.com> and <http://www.tvradio.com> web sites. Another site (<http://www.tvfind.com>) was very useful after data collection for coding the call

letters and network affiliation of stations without web sites.

Table 6 summarizes the representation of websites by network affiliation. Some of the differences can be explained by sampling methods, but the general trend is that the website shares approximate the networks' audience shares. This finding is not likely to endure in the future, when station websites become less peripheral to the promotional effort and more central to the distribution of station content.

Unlike many previous studies that designated the page as the unit of analysis, this study followed the example of Rosales and Pitts (1997), using the entire web site for each station. Data were collected by station and entered first into a spreadsheet to preserve qualitative information. The final step was to collapse information into raw counts and categories for analysis by SPSS.

Some variables used in previous studies (e.g., advertising and news content) were not collected, in order to focus on program promotion. Other variables, such as selling merchandise (used only by Rosales & Pitts) and conducting contests, were added to better understand the kinds of promotional activities that have become popular since the earlier studies were conducted.

Intercoder reliability was measured using a double-coded subsample of 30 sites, following the technique outlined by Bucy et al. (1998). The average reliability across all items coded was .79, similar to previous studies.

Results

Many of the descriptive statistics for the 1999 data have already been presented above in the review of literature, by way of comparison. This section begins by addressing the additional

variables that were not commonly (or consistently) studied in earlier research. It also examines in greater depth (see Table 7) the information reported in Table 5. Next, a summary of statistical information is given for uncollapsed categorical data. Finally, a qualitative look at the rich detail provided by some (but not all) of the coders is presented.

Table 7 demonstrates that nearly all affiliates focus on local programming. Only in the case of the WB, whose affiliates are the fifth or sixth stations in the market, can one find less than total commitment to local programs. Syndication is another story entirely. Fox affiliates, traditionally the older “independent” stations in each market, are more likely to promote first-run and off-network programs. NBC affiliates, often the earliest in their respective markets to have a strong web presence, are less likely to promote their syndicated shows. With regard to promotion of network shows, the six stations in the 1999 sample showed total commitment, owing largely to the situation where the WB primetime shows are often the best fare available on WB affiliates.

Table 8 summarizes the findings on merchandising and contesting. One-fourth of all stations are pushing the envelope of standard banner-and-listing program promotion. Commercial tie-ins, cross-promotion and contests have been used for years by promotion managers, and now the web sites are starting to show the traditional methods in a new venue.

Table 9 lists the stylistic web page variables by their means, standard deviations and ranges. For example, the use of photographs averages 25.3 per station site, but the skewed distribution puts the median at only 12 photos to account for the outliers with hundreds of photographs and the many more sites that use graphics rather than real pictures.

Qualitative findings

One problem with quantitative content analysis is that it reduces rich data to raw numbers. Counts and categories are great for comparisons (and preferable for testing hypotheses), but ineffective at getting a complete descriptive picture. For example, the finding that nearly all stations promote local programs does not speak to the range of activity. In the 1999 data, the kinds of promotion ran the gamut from (in the optional words of the coders) “yes; plenty” to “yes; very little.” Rather than further categorize such descriptions, it should be noted that there were three common threads of local shows being promoted: local news (e.g., News 10, WB20 News), area team sports, and weather. The promotion of an occasional local talk show or public affairs program proved to be exceptions rather than the rule.

As noted earlier, there were fewer instances of syndicated and network promos. The four most-commonly-cited syndicated shows were Home Improvement, Oprah, Ricki Lake, and Jerry Springer. The four most-commonly-cited network shows were ABC World News Tonight, Conan O’Brien, Jay Leno, and JAG.

Although no qualitative data were collected for stylistic web page elements, the kinds of specialized web techniques (e.g., streaming video, interactive feedback, and contests) were coded. In the instance of streaming video, the following types of content were identified: audio feeds, skycam views, news stories, local radar screens, sports, promos, and movie reviews. Stations that run online contests used the same trivia question or sweepstakes approach used on-air, with the usual prizes ranging from trips (e.g., to Las Vegas) to concert and sporting event tickets. Two stations exploited the graphic/textual nature of web pages to offer crossword-type puzzles.

Merchandise offers ranged from program-related items (T-shirts, ballcaps, souvenirs, videos) to flowers, magazines, and advertising coupons. Other unusual offerings that defy classification were free slide shows, virtual station tours, free live psychic readings, tax assistance, instant polls, job boards, recipes, games, and kids' clubs. In some instances, the stations stepped out of the realm of broadcast content entirely, to take full advantage of a different type of medium. For example, advertising banners and product tie-ins were pitched to local merchants as business opportunities.

Discussion of findings

Although the tabulations of the content analysis are useful in comparing previous findings, the qualitative data are equally suited to a discussion of the degree to which internet promotion of programs is akin to traditional print and on-air promotion of shows, and in what ways is it similar and dissimilar. This section draws on common practice among broadcasters off-line with the goal of portraying the role of internet promotion in the larger scheme.

One of the main dissimilarities (and a clear benefit) of web-based promotion is the ready availability of free space. On-air promotion has a time-scarcity value and is frequently bumped by paid commercial messages, with the exception of fixed-position promotion (Ferguson & Moses, 1999). Display space in newspapers, on outdoor billboards, and on the radio is not free, either.

On-air and print promos conserve scarce resources by grouping program promos into multiple spots, a seldom-used practice on the web where space is always plentiful and promotion is usually fixed-position. One problem is that the chronology of a program schedule is not

reinforced by the use of stand-alone promotional messages. Another drawback of this dissimilarity is that good rotation of promotional messages is not maintained on websites, often because updating of online material is not a strong priority when compared to keeping on-air promos current. Until the number of people who are regularly exposed to web promotion approaches parity with on-air and print promotion, attention to online promos will not be a high priority.

Another dissimilarity is the widespread use of generic promotion online as compared to the use of specific promos on-air. Eastman (1999) identifies 16 design guidelines, one of which reads "Use specifics more often than generics for programs" (p. 53). Clearly, web promotion should use more specifics, but is unlikely to do so until stations see the need to have better rotation of messages.

Perhaps the greatest similarity between contemporary online promotion and conventional offline promotion is the way that message layout resembles outdoor advertising. Billboards along busy roads need to grab audience attention quickly and without much detail. Many online promos are designed like billboards; even web advertising markets itself as a "billboard" service because of the strong similarities to outdoor advertising. Thus, the promotional strategy is creating or reinforcing awareness through a simple listing, rather than persuading through a unique selling proposition (USB).

Another way to identify the similarities and dissimilarities is to examine the promotional activities that local television stations do "off-web." The amount of local news promotion online is very similar to off-line promotion. Ferguson & Moses (1999) identify local news promotion as key to the local effort: The web pages in this study found local news quite prominent on a very

large number of local sites.

Ferguson, Eastman, and Klein (1999) identify three basic strategies for promotional messages: acquisitive, competitive, and retentive. That is, stations seek to acquire more audience, take away their competitors' audience, and retain their loyal audience. The relative importance given by stations to these goals are different according to the medium; for example, commercial television is much more tilted to acquisitive strategies than commercial radio stations, which focus more on retentive strategies (Ferguson, Eastman, & Klein, 1999, p. 19). This present examination of current practice (in 1999) of stations practicing web-based promotion suggests that building loyalty (retentive strategies) is most important, further indicating a similarity with the radio model over the television model.

In any case, the identity that a web visitor can associate with a specific station site is more important than the image the station project. Constantly reinventing the web interface and tinkering with the page appearance may actually work against a strong web identity.

Finally, web promotion and nonweb promotion are similar in their attention to the use of logos, wordmarks, identifiers, and slogans. The main associated dissimilarity lies in the unity of purpose, or lack thereof. A web page often tries to do everything at one time, rather than to one thing at a time and let the user choose a direction. In this sense, the web site is more like a yellow pages advertisement in that both pack as much information together as possible because it may be a while before the messages are revised.

Conclusion

The data seem to demonstrate that the internet is central rather than peripheral to the station's promotional effort. In 1995 the station promotion director was content to think of the internet as a medium that was additional to on-air and in-print. In the near future, station managers must consider that internet pages are of equal (or greater) importance to more traditional venues for station promotion. The key element is interactivity. The internet permits the broadcast audience to "pull" information about a station, rather than the old push model. Furthermore, as the opening quotation to this paper suggests, the internet makes the old network/affiliate model less relevant and the idea of a locally-oriented station more important.

To move to this point, stations must commit more resources to websites (Polon, 1999). Station engineers must provide better servers and promotion staffs must find better ways of updating information. As the usability of site content improves, the possibility of advertising and merchandising provides the means to fund a deeper commitment to an online presence.

Methodological Issues

Future research must contend with the selection of meaningful data. Some studies, including this one, chose things to count merely because it could be easily counted. Enough exploratory research has been done to start testing some assumptions about web pages.

It would seem advisable to move away from the focus on the page as a unit of analysis and more toward the station itself. For one thing, the number of channels (and websites) is more likely to remain relatively slow-growing when compared to the number of web pages and links. Keeping

track of fewer variables is more parsimonious.

Sampling remains an issue in content analysis and the study of websites is no different. No perfect sampling frame is possible with all the shared promotion on sister (translator) stations and statewide public television networks. Should two identical web sites for two different FCC-licensed stations be counted twice (as was done a few times in this study)?

Greater use of qualitative information should be generated. As this study demonstrated, it can be collected alongside the numerical data and reduced to categorical data is necessary for comparison. Whether or not it can generate useful information about the future directions of internet promotion remains an open question.

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Table 1

Number of screens per website and percentage with frames

STUDY	DATA YEAR	PAGE LENGTH	% WITH FRAMES	n
Bates and King	1995	3.4*	NA	61
Bates, Chambers, et al.	1996	2.67	NA	416
Bucy, Lang, et al.		2.4 (mean)	79.4	496
McClung (using Bates data)	1995	3.4	NA	60
Ferguson	1999	NA	23.4	177
*according to McClung (1995) N=60				

Table 2 Percentage of pages with photographs and linked items

STUDY	DATA YEAR	PHOTOS	LINKS	n
Bates and King	1995	13.8 (medium)	46.7	61
Bates, Chambers, et al.	1996	5.8	67.7*	416
Bucy, Lang, et al.	1997	31.9	97.8	496
Ferguson (% of stations)	1999	86.0	80.4	179
			* more than 5	

Table 3 Percentage of pages with blinking, animation and full-motion video

STUDY	DATA YEAR	BLINKING	ANIMATION	VIDEO	n
Bates and King	1995	NA	NA	0.2	61
Bates, Chambers, et al.	1996	NA	20.5	6.9	416
Bucy, Lang, et al.	1997	9.7	11.9	NA	496
Ferguson (% of stations)	1999	29.4	55.9	36.9	179

Table 4

Percentage of pages with e-mail feedback and other interaction

STUDY	Data YEAR	E-MAIL	OTHER	n
Bates and King	1995	12.3	0.1	61
Bates, Chambers, et al.	1996	39.4	1.5	401
Rosales & Pitts	1996	97.9	NA	47
Bucy, Lang, et al.	1997	49.4	9.7 (chat)	496
Ferguson (% of stations)	1999	92.1	19.8	177

Table 5 Percentage of pages with promotion (local, syndicated, network)

STUDY	DATA YEAR	LOCAL	SYNDICATED	NETWORK	n
Bates and King*	1995	NA	NA	NA	61
Bates, Chambers, et al.	1996	NA	7.0	46.2	403
Bucy, Lang, et al.	1997	NA	NA	NA	496
Ferguson (% of stations)	1999	98.3	57.3	69.1**	178
*37.7% of pages were “promotional”				**Big 4 Affiliates	
				74.6%	126

Table 7 Cross tabulation of promos by network affiliation and promo source

1999 data	n	% Local	% Syndication	% Network
ABC	36	100.0	58.3	61.1
CBS	30	96.7	67.7	74.2
NBC	44	100.0	52.3	81.8
Fox	15	100.0	80.0	86.7
UPN	3	100.0	100.0	66.7
WB	6	83.3	66.7	100.0
PBS	32	96.9	36.4	48.5

Table 8 Percentage of stations with merchandising and contesting

STUDY	Data YEAR	MERCHANDISE	CONTESTS	n
Rosales & Pitts	1996	47.0	NA	47
Ferguson	1999	24.3	27.0	177

Table 9 Statistical summary of stylistic elements

	Mean	Mode	Median	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum	n
Screen Count	56.4	1	36	62.8	1	350	173
Frames	31.3	0	3	58.8	0	298	175
Photos	25.3	0	12	36.5	0	234	178
Paragraphs	113.3	0	50	155.6	0	975	175
Bullet points (links)	65.4	0	16	125.4	0	883	179
Streaming video	5.9	0	0	17.6	0	130	179