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Research in Media Promotion

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Online Program Promotion

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In July 1999, Polon wrote online: "The whole point of a web site is to increase viewer loyalty to your station and its services, thus counteracting declining numbers for network television." Using the Internet to promote to local radio and television audiences has grown as web design has developed over the last decade. Once a simple listing and a few links, the local broadcaster's online presence has evolved into a sophisticated promotional tool. Broadcast viewers can now use the Internet to find audio and video content that they missed on-air and to tie into conventional broadcast programming. The assumption broadcasters make is that those people who find satisfying material online are more likely to watch on-air in the future.

Nonetheless, few studies have looked at aspects of online promotion by broadcasters. This chapter examines the literature to date and presents an original study looking at the degree to which Internet promotion of programs is akin to traditional print and on-air promotion of shows and in what ways it is dissimilar. The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues in researching online promotion and some methodological problems for scholarly investigation into online program promotion with the goal of encouraging more disinterested academic research in this area.

USES OF ONLINE

Although the literature on the Internet is already enormous and swells daily, very little has been published—online or on paper—about media promotion via the web. The issue is important because trade reports suggest that as many as 84 million adults in the United States accessed online services in 1999, up from 66 million adults the previous year (IntelliQuest, 1999). Because of technological convergence, the web appears to be changing very rapidly. As Bucy, Lang, Potter, and Grabe (1999) report, much of the research about online sites has been conducted by commercial services and is proprietary, or it has been qualitative and anecdotal in nature. Aside from studies of such phenomena as bulletin boards and news groups (see, e.g., James, Wotring, & Forrest, 1995), most academic surveys of online media sites tend to be broad and to disregard program promotion or subsume it within analyses of much larger units dealing with a media company's entire web site. Coffey and Stipp (1997) found that computer use does not compete directly with television use, implying that online can serve as a path feeding into broadcast and cable use.

Most of the growing number of studies examine the use of the web from the audience standpoint. In particular, the availability of news content on station web sites has become one focal area (see Niekamp, 1997; Rosales & Pitts, 1997). Atkin, Jeffres, and Neuendorf (1998) studied online communication using a diffusion of innovations approach. They found that attitudinal variables were not more explanatory than demographics, but they did find the lack of use of computers online to be associated with a "local media" orientation, perhaps suggesting that many local stations may be missing their most ardent audience by not putting information online. Advertising and e-mail have also been of considerable interest (see Niekamp, 1996), but only a very few studies look at online promotion of television programs—although a great many comments about program promotion appear in chat rooms and in station feedback (see http://www. promolounge.com).

Any analysis of online promotion must consider many design elements and features of online services. One of the most interesting to researchers, because it has important implications for communication theory, is the interactive capacity of the web that permits communication directly between consumers and businesses and consumers. When Ha and James (1998) studied 110 web sites, they found that service companies had failed to capitalize on connecting with customers where there was no transaction for goods, suggesting that media web sites are envisioned merely as showcases of company accomplishments. Yet increasing audience size—the primary function of program promotion—remains one of the powerful forces driving broadcast and cable networks to utilize the web at the present time.

Online communication has also been examined from a uses-and-gratifications perspective. Perse and Dunn (1998) studied a national random telephone sample of 1,071 people and found that computers were not one of the main channels used to fill media-related needs. Ferguson and Perse (2000) surveyed 250 respondents and reported that one key difference between television use and online communication is that the latter is not a relaxing way to pass time. Although these studies shed some light on audience use, they do not provide information for the senders of online messages, particularly with regard to improving media promotion.

From a theoretical perspective, Bucy et al. (1999) pointed to media research connecting such messages attributes as attention, arousal, memory, and preference with attributes of content and form (see Lang, 1990; Lang, Bolls, Potter, & Kawahara, 1999; and Perse, chap. 2, and Eastman & Bolls, chap. 3, this volume). In addition, interactive capability and audio and video streaming are characteristics contributing to perceptions of ease of use and appeal of web pages. Studies that analyze the content and form of media web sites can provide guidelines for web designs that have greater value for the industry and, at the same time, lead to sites of more value to users. Research into meaningful guidelines may, ultimately, contribute to understanding the workings of cognitive processes.

RESEARCH ABOUT ONLINE PROMOTION

Previous research has identified three distinct areas of online media promotion: 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 programs—on the web itself. This chapter concentrates on program promotion by stations via the web and includes findings about the other two topics whenever possible. Clearly, most research so far has focused on promotion by television stations, although Bucy et al. (1999) looked more broadly at popular sites of all kinds and Murphy (1998) looked at the value of radio station web sites in the sole study of that medium.

Although scholars such as Bucy et al. (1999) have asked 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, etc.), 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 in *Internet World* on measuring advertising on web sites (Virzi, 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 laid out the primary strategies and tactics of persuasion in advertising, in similar fashion, Eastman, Ferguson, and Klein (1999) spelled 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 notable case study, Wolfe (1997) recounted NBC's history of web promotion and concluded that web use has matured to the stage where web users expect sophistication in design and have little tolerance for such things as errors or delays in page updates. There is no comparable research about traditional print and on-air promotion.

Studies of Station Sites

Table 11.1 summarizes the nine research articles and papers that analyzed online promotion by television stations.[1] Five of these studies examined local television stations' use of the web, including how the viewing of programs can be promoted; three studies considered more specialized subtopics, and one ranged beyond media-only sites.

Looking at all 3,316 pages of the 1995 web sites of 61 television stations, Bates and King (1996) sought to discover how the early innovators and adopters among television stations were using the World Wide Web. They asked what content their web sites contained and were particularly interested in whether the stations saw online communication as offering promotional opportunities, such as by providing guides, information about talent and programs, and/or the opportunity to obtain information previously aired, such as transcripts of special reports or news stories. Second, they asked whether stations were taking full advantage of the features of the Internet and whether they were providing the kinds of content that users tend to find interesting, attractive, and/or useful. The answers to these questions came in the form of numerous tables that reported the values for the many variables they measured (page size, use of graphics, and use of interactive hypertext), some of which are summarized in the tables assembled later in this chapter. But the overall finding (see Table 11.1) was that chronologically early (meaning mid-1990s) web sites were unsophisticated and used only portions of the capacity of the web. Bates and King concluded that web sites were mostly used for self-promotion by the station, rather than as conduits for information.

Niekamp (1996) analyzed the 1996 web sites of 123 television stations to assess their features in relation to network affiliations and market size. He found that e-mail was the most common form of feedback and appeared commonly on news pages and most general pages, especially on sites of

[1]Bucy et al. (1999) included television stations but also had many nonmedia sites in their study.

TABLE 11.1
Summary of Online Promotion Studies

Author(s)	*Publication Year, Data Year*	*Database and Sample*	*Selected Findings*
Bates and King	1996 1995	Analysis of web sites of 61 U.S. TV stations, examining all 3,316 pages for features.	Found that early TV station web sites lacked advanced characteristics and were not sophisticated, did not make full use of Internet functionality, and were dominated by station self-promotion, as opposed to being conduits of information.
Niekamp	1996 1996	Analysis of 123 web sites for U.S. TV stations to describe features, uses, revenue sources, and roles of network affiliation and market size.	Found that e-mail feedback is prevalent for news and general pages for most sites and text versions of news stories were the most common content with links to station's local news operations; showed that Big Three affiliates had the strongest web presence, but little support by advertisers.
Bates et al.	1997 1996	Investigated 416 TV stations with web sites and coded up to two levels, including main (home) page for features used by stations.	Located improvements in the use of the web and inclusion of web features compared to 1 year before, but noted that audio and video features were largely unused and that sites lacked nonpromotional content; found more graphic and visual elements in sites.
Rosales and Pitts	1997 1996	Analyzed 47 TV station web sites to look for e-mail, clips, pictures, links, graphics, news, station promotion, and programming information.	Reported the percentages of sites with particular features and concluded that all stations used their sites to promote the station itself; found that 81% offered programming information, but did not distinguish program promotion from station promotion; concluded that stations' intent was to target users who might be potential audiences for on-air, using contests, merchandising, and info about station personnel and mission.
Niekamp	1997 1997	E-mail survey of 108 responding stations (34%) asking about their features, interactivity, quantity of e-mail in relation	Found that hot links in news stories significantly predicted the number of page reads per day, whereas the presence of audio and video clips, interactive features, length of time

(Continued)

TABLE 11.1
(Continued)

Author(s)	*Publication Year, Data Year*	*Database and Sample*	*Selected Findings*
		to market size, audio and video in news content, and frequency of redesign, using multiple regression analysis of usage.	online, frequent redesign, and small and midmarket size did not predict use of pages (although large market stations were more heavily used, as well as stations with more hot links); concluded that users might be "news junkies."
McClung	1997 1996 & 1997	Conducted a secondary analysis of Bates and King's and Bates et al.'s data in order to assess the efficiency of sites.	Revealed that TV web sites became increasingly efficient in presenting information to end users by adhering to more precise document representation, with the outcome of making information retrieval easier for users; concluded that the trend was toward user efficiency.
Kiernan and Levy	1999 1997	Surveyed commercial TV stations about the features of web sites and degree of competition in local markets.	Found that the content of web sites varied widely in the kinds of news and other content offered and in the types of interactive features supplied; calculated web competition as content diversity (a breadth measure) and site diversity (a measure of formats utilized in sites), but found no significant relationship between diversity and station characteristics such as market size, financial resources, or network affiliation.
Bucy et al.	1999 1997	Analyzed home pages of 496 sites drawn from top-100 most-used sites to find out if web capabilities were exploited; compared commerical and noncommercial sites and the relationship between traffic and site complexity.	Described a large set of site features in detail and by kind of source (commercial or not); included nonmedia sites, so results go beyond TV stations; found significant relationships between the amount of site traffic and home-page structure for both commercial and noncommercial sites; concluded that site packaging will become increasingly important to gaining users' attention.
Atkin et al.	1998 1998	Conducted a regional telephone survey of 377 randomly selected adults about the role of the Internet in their media choices.	Found that Internet access did not figure significantly in most consumers' orientation toward the local media; the rank of TV web sites was far less prominent than that of more traditional media.

stations affiliated with ABC, CBS, or NBC. However, Niekamp (1996) found far less advertising content than anticipated, and he did not analyze the promotion of programs.

A subsequent study of the 1996 web sites of 416 television stations by Bates et al. (1997) provided an opportunity for comparisons over time with the findings in Bates and King (1996). The results showed a general improvement in the station web sites, especially with regard to graphic and visual elements, and a higher level of use of sites for station promotion, although the employment of audio and video features remained very low.

Rosales and Pitts (1997) located 47 television stations with web sites in 1996 out of 360 randomly selected stations, concluding that only a small percentage (13%) of stations were actually making use of the web as of May 1996. Their study focused on whether existing sites had such features as audio and video clips, pictures, graphics, and links, and they reported that virtually all the sampled stations lacked audio and video clips but had graphics and links. Only one third or so carried pictures and had links to networks, but few linked to sister stations. However, Rosales and Pitts found the links distracting and confusing for users. They concluded that most stations used sites for promotion but concentrated on such station self-promotional information as mission/vision statements and lists of personnel and such activities as contests and giveaways. Although they located a sizable proportion of sites with programming information, their study did not distinguish station from program promotion.

In a second study conducted in 1997, Niekamp (1997) attempted to predict site traffic (the "pages read" by consumers) using features of television web sites, and he found that hot links were the primary significant predictor. Other characteristics, such as the presence or absence of audio or video clips or e-mail, length of time that the station had had a web site, frequency of redesign of the site, did not predict site traffic. Not surprisingly, he did find that large market stations were more heavily used than the sites of small or midsized market stations. Niekamp (1997) concluded that web users probably tended to be "news junkies."

Reanalyzing the data previously collected by Bates and King (1996) and Bates et al. (1997), McClung (1997) focused on features related to ease of use—which he defined as efficiency for the user. He found that stations had become more efficient by standardizing their pages, but concluded that stations' self-representation was both inadequate and misleading.

Looking in another direction, in a study of the 1997 web sites of 62 U.S. television stations, Kiernan and Levy (1999) focused on the characteristics of sites in relation to the amount of local competition, in the assumption that high competition would result in more elaborated web sites, an assumption ultimately refuted by their analysis. When they evaluated journalistic competition among web sites, they found no relationship between site characteristics and numbers or kinds of competitors. Assessing such attributes as whether the site carried local news, network news, weather reports, sports information, program scripts, archives, and audio and video clips, Kiernan and Levy found no relationship between their measures of diversity and such station characteristics. They also found that the content of web sites was not related to station financial resources, market rank, or network affiliation. They concluded that stations may not be competing journalistically, at least in ways that are reflected in web sites.

One of the most sophisticated studies of site attributes to date comes from Bucy et al. (1999), and it is particularly useful because it spells out in detail many of the formal features related to the promotional characteristics of web sites. Bucy et al. coded the home pages of 496 randomly selected high-volume web sites in 1997, encompassing some media sites but stretching beyond to include educational and other commercial sites. Bucy et al. concluded that web-page designers have failed to make much use of the interactive and audio/video capabilities of the medium, but that more complex web sites seem to foster increased web traffic. They also concluded that web pages tended to conform to accepted design rules largely by default because most were so technologically simple. This study provides a model for future research of entire web sites or more selective pages of media and nonmedia sites.

Atkin et al. (1998) undertook a random telephone survey of 377 television stations to understand the ways that the 1998 media sites of local stations fit into the public's communication orientation and how they ranked as sources of current information. They found that media web sites played only a very small role in the minds of most consumers at the time the survey was conducted.

The gaps in the kinds of data collected in these studies and their apparently contradictory findings, as well as the rapid changes in computer technology and increased consumer adoption of faster equipment, suggested that it was time for another study of the design features of web sites. The study reported in this chapter was limited to television station sites in order to focus on program promotion, a critical aspect of web communication overlooked in several previous studies.

A STUDY OF ONLINE STATION PROMOTION

The broadcasting industry has taken a keen interest in what stations are doing online, particularly with regard to program promotion, and the weekly trade journal *Broadcasting & Cable* has begun devoting a section to the "Site of the Week" (Tedesco, 1998). Because stations devote so many of

their human and dollar resources to the improvement of their web sites, continuous measurement of sites helps practitioners track the latest developments and scholars estimate their impact on society and the media industry. The study reported in this chapter analyzes features of current program promotion in the online medium with the goal of adding to the developing database about web-site characteristics. It also lays a foundation for further research in areas heretofore unexplored by providing a 1999 snapshot of how television stations are adapting multimedia to an old-fashioned one-to-many model of media communication, at least in terms of marketing and promotion.

Research Questions

Taken together, the available trade press and scholarly reports suggest that station web sites should have become more sophisticated by 1999 because of the industry footrace to outdo the competition by offering advanced online features. Rather than focus on hypotheses, however, this study explored the ways in which television stations were using online web sites in 1999 to promote their programs. Five research questions guided the research:

R1: What stylistic elements characterize television station web sites and what do they contribute to online promotion of programs?

R2: In what ways have web features and online promotional practices of television stations varied over time?

R3: How do the features and promotional aspects of station web sites vary in relation to network affiliation?

R4: What sources of promotion (local, syndicated, network) do affiliates draw on?

R5: What proportion of stations conduct contesting and merchandising online?

These questions were tackled by collecting data as closely matched as possible to that in previous studies as well as collecting new facets of sites that relate to the ways popular television programs carried by local stations are promoted online.

Method

This study used both quantitative and qualitative content analysis to assess television stations' use of the web to promote their programs. The content of a sample of 290 television station sites, including their use of links to the seven broadcast networks of ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN, WB, and PBS.[2]

Sample

In February of 1999, a systematic random sample was drawn from the sampling frame of all U.S. television stations, including translator frequencies, appearing on the FCC web site (www.fcc.org). The list appeared as a binary file formatted as an Excel spreadsheet of station frequency assignments for digital television (HDTV). For this study, every fifth listing was marked from a random starting point, and a sample of 291 stations was generated, of which 179 had web sites (62%). Because the original FCC database listed only the channel number and the city of license, individual station's call letters were located using http://www.ultimatetv.com. Another site (http://www.tvfind.com) provided the call letters in combination with the network affiliations of stations without web sites.[3]

Variables, Coders, and Analysis

Unlike many previous studies that designated the home page as the unit of analysis, this study followed the example of Rosales and Pitts (1997) and used the entire web site for each station. However, the study's focus was on the pages in each website that promoted specific television programs, not on the pages that provided generic lineup information or background material on the station's history or management, talent, or technology.

The methodology and features of web sites examined in this study drew on studies by Bucy et al. (1999), Bates and King (1996), Niekamp (1996), and Bates et al. (1997). The variables studied included the same six variables collected in previous research: number of pages and percentage using frames for each web site, the number of photographs, text and graphic links, full-motion video, and merchandising pages. Seven additional variables were measured in order to focus on program-page design attributes: the use of background colors, the warmth or coolness of colors, animation, sources of text content, and degree of scrolling (also called blinking), as well as interactive features such as feedback and e-mail directly related to the programmer. Some variables used in previous studies (e.g., advertising and news content) were not collected, in order to focus on program promotion. Two other variables, such as the selling of merchandise (used only by Rosales & Pitts, 1997) and conducting contests, were added to better understand the kinds of promotional activities that have become popular since the earlier studies were conducted.

Coders were recruited from a class of senior-level students familiar with broadcasting research, with each of 33 students examining the web sites of 10 stations or fewer. After coding, intercoder reliability was measured using a double-coded subsample of 30 sites. The average reliability across all items coded was .82, an acceptable level for exploratory research.

Quantitative data were collected for each station web site and entered first into a spreadsheet, along with short qualitative descriptions of each site. The final step was the collapse of quantitative information from raw counts into categories for statistical analysis. Qualitative information was examined separately, and focused on general comments about each web site made by the coders.

Results

The sample of 179 station sites provided a wealth of data for analysis. The section below compares the findings in this study (called "Ferguson" in the tables) to the findings in previous studies, before introducing the new material.

Comparative Station Site Attributes

Although the original studies are far richer in detail than outlined in Tables 11.2 and 11.4, the summarized information permits comparisons of congruent findings in the current study (labeled "Ferguson 1999" in the tables) with the studies by Bates and King (1996), Niekamp (1996), Bates et al. (1997), Rosales and Pitts (1997), McClung (1997), Kiernan and Levy (1999), and Bucy et al. (1999). The studies are listed in the order of oldest to most recent data in order to illustrate changes over time.

Tables 11.2 and 11.3 identify studies by the year that the data were collected rather than publication date, because change happens so swiftly in the computer business that a delay in publication might confuse the time order of online developments.

Table 11.2 shows the percentage of the web sites studied by the various researchers in relation to the network affiliation of the stations,[4] also including the data from the current study. The data show that in 1995, ABC, CBS, and, perhaps surprisingly, PBS stations accounted for a substantial

[2]Pax TV was not included, as its programming largely consists of off-network reruns at this time.

[3]In July 1999, the most comprehensive site was located at http://www.metronet.com/~chipk/usatv.

[4]As previously mentioned, Bucy et al. (1999) assessed sites as either commercial or noncommercial but included more than just television stations, thus no data is reported for that study in Table 11.2.

TABLE 11.2
Comparative Percentage of Network Affiliations for Television Web Sites

Study/Year of Data Collection	Affiliated Network									
	ABC	CBS	NBC	Fox	WB	UPN	Pax	PBS	Indie	Other
Bates/1995	26.7	22.9	16.4	4.9		1.6		21.3		6.2
Bates/1996	15.5	16.7	20.7	10.6	2.1	4.5		11.8	4.0	14.1
Niekamp/1996	23.5	28.4	25.2	14.6	2.4	4.1		none	1.6	0.2
Rosales/1996	21.3	14.9	23.4	6.4	4.3	4.3		none	2.1	23.3
Rosales/1997[a]	17.8	20.5	21.2	9.0	2.6	3.8		none	7.5	17.6
Kiernan/1997	31.0	24.0	26.0	13.0	5.0	2.0		none		
Ferguson/1999	18.2	13.1	17.2	10.3	3.1	2.4	1.7	15.5	8.9	9.6

[a]Addendum to 1996 study.

number of web sites, but most studies reveal the early dominance of NBC stations and the later strengthening of CBS's and ABC's sites.[5] Some of the differences in proportions in this table can be explained by sampling methods, but the general trend is that the web-site shares approximate the commercial networks' audience shares. The public network, however, tends to be better represented online than its average audience share might suggest, perhaps because its upscale audience contains more web users. Use of the web is likely to increase substantially in the future as stations perceive sites as less peripheral to the promotional effort and more central to the distribution of their content. Conceived as a pie chart, Fig. 11.1 distinguishes the current study to illustrate the distribution of the affiliations of the web sites that were examined.

Table 11.3 displays the number of stations analyzed, the average length of the pages, and the proportion of pages using the device called frames. (*Frames* are sections of the screen that may encircle the center of the screen, but more probably occupy the side or bottom or top in a band that alters independently of the main part of the screen. Such devices increase the information-carrying capacity of the screen and make it a better tool for promotion.) As the table shows, there are large gaps in data collection and widely differing methodologies among these studies, although they are the most closely related available. The number of pages (or screen length) was not commonly measured because it varies so widely depending on the receiver's technology; even with the same equipment, the user's browser settings affect the number of screens displayed on a site with vertical-scrolling content. Congruent with trade reports, most authors have

[5]Bates and King's (1996) first small sample did not reveal the shift in network dominance because the total depended on number of pages per site (and one ABC station had 600 pages).

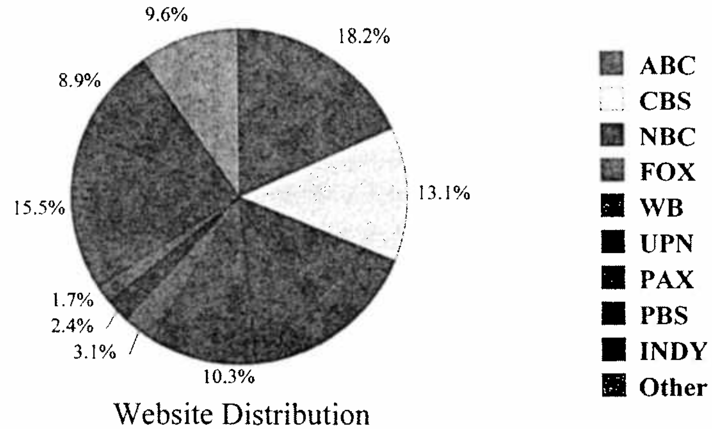

FIG. 11.1. Proportions of stations affiliated with networks.

concluded that web sites are growing only slightly in sheer size. Bates and King (1996) found an average of 54 pages per site (calculated later by McClung, 1997) and Bucy et al. (1999) reported that the average home page consumed three or fewer screens (86%). At the same time, the two studies that collected data on the use of multiple frames suggest that it may be declining. If so, simplification of web sites is addressing the needs of the user by increasing the speed at which pages appear and minimalizing the need for advanced software and hardware.

In addition, Table 11.3 provides stronger data on the number of photographs on the pages examined, and reveals that the quantity appears to be greatly increasing, although the appropriateness of photographs naturally varies according to the kind of content examined. One would expect few photos on home pages, for example, but many on program promotion pages. In addition, both studies by Bates and others use subcategories (e.g., small photo, medium photo, large photo) that defy direct comparisons, but the trend appears to be toward more photographs. This coincides with industry recommendations for effective promotional practice; display advertisements with photographs attract more attention (see Eastman et al., 1999).

Table 11.3 also reports the average percentage of web sites examined with links to other sites. The results show an increase over time, peaking at 80% or 90%, but with the expected variation with the kind of page examined. Clearly, most home pages will have links, whereas pages promoting programs or other information will have fewer links. Rosales and Pitts (1997) made particular note of the distraction and confusion arising from having frequent highlighted links inside paragraphs. They refer to the practice as cumbersome and confusing for users. Studies that go be-

TABLE 11.3
Number of Pages per Web Sites, and Percentage
With Frames, Photographs, Links, Blinking Technology,
Animation, and Streaming Video Clips

Study	*Data Year*	*No. of Stations*	*Average No. of Pages/Screens*	*% With Frames*	*% With Photos*	*% With Links*	*% With Blinking*	*% With Animation*	*% With Video*
Bates and King	1995	61	54[a]	NA	13.8%	46.7%	NA	NA	0.2%
Niekamp	1996	123	NA	NA	7.3%	62.6%	NA	NA	0.8%
Bates et al.	1996	416	?	NA	5.8%	67.7%	NA	20.5%	6.9%
Rosales and Pitts	1996	47	NA	NA	36.2%	98.0%	NA	NA	36.2%
Kiernan and Levy	1997	62	NA	NA	40.7%	81.3%	NA	NA	18.9%
Bucy et al.	1997	496	3 or less, 86%[b]	79.4%	31.9%	97.8%	9.7%	11.9%	NA
Ferguson	1999	177	NA	23.4%	86.0%	80.4%	29.4%	55.9%	36.9%

[a]Average total number of pages per site. [b]Average percentage of sites having the home page completed in three screens or fewer.

yond the counting of links into particular types in relation to particular content are clearly needed.

Table 11.3 includes the percentages of sites with blinking capability, animation, and video streaming, insofar as these researchers reported them. The simple device of blinking text appears to be an effective technique for attracting attention, so it was counted separately. The present study gave wide latitude to coders to define blinking and animation, but limited the category of video to real-time streaming in this study (generally, it was called either archived material or real-time in previous studies). Surprisingly, over one third of station sites in the current study took advantage of browser features such as RealVideo that permit streaming video. Seven types of streaming-video content were identified: audio feeds, skycam views, news stories, local radar screens, sports, program promos, and movie reviews.

In sum, this portion of the findings demonstrates a marked increase in the use of all three advanced technologies over the mid-1990s. Because faster servers and computer connections will speed up the reception of photographs, animation, and other complex elements, they will facilitate greater use of such elements in future web promotion.

Sources of Promotional Content and Interactions

Table 11.4 looks at the sources of promotional content and the interactive features found in the various studies. It illustrates the relative paucity of data on the use of local, syndicated, and national content. Some previous studies did collect information on the use of program schedules and station logos, but none of the earlier studies counted the instances of local program promotion. The meaning of the leap from 7% to 57.3% in syndicated content is not clear, nor are the variations in levels of network content, though it can be expected to be increasing. Ferguson found that rate of network pages went up among affiliates of the Big Four networks to 74.6% of the content. Bates and King (1996) did report, however, that 37.7% of the pages they investigated were promotional.

Table 11.4 also reports the percentages (or stations) that use interactive communication with the audience. The two studies by Bates and others (1996; 1997) use each page as the unit of analysis, so direct comparisons to other research are invalid. Even so, the table shows dramatic increases in the availability of e-mail and other kinds of interactions on station web sites. Bucy et al. (1999) found an average of 27.1 asynchronous elements per home page, including text links (98%), picture links (66.1%), e-mail links (49.4%), phone numbers (14.5%), addresses (8.5%), and survey forms (4.2%). It has always been clear that getting feedback of some kind from the viewers and listeners is crucial to a successful promotional effort—

TABLE 11.4
Percentage of Pages With Promotion From Local, Syndicated, or Network Sources, and With E-Mail Feedback, and Other Means of Interaction

	Source of Promotion			Interactive Features	
Study	*% Local*	*% Syndicated*	*% Network*	*E-Mail*	*Other Interaction*
Bates and King	NA	NA	NA	12.3%	0.1%
Niekamp	NA	NA	NA	82.1%	NA
Bates et al.	NA	7.0%	46.2%	39.4%	1.5%
Rosales and Pitts	NA	NA	78.7%	NA	NA
Kiernan and Levy	NA	NA	NA	27.4%	NA
Bucy et al.	NA	NA	NA	49.4%	9.7%
Ferguson	98.3%	57.3%	69.1%	92.1%	19.8%

whether that feedback came in the form of handwritten letters, telephone calls, or ratings. Online sites appear to be changing the way broadcasters conceive their programming service to audiences because with interactivity stations can tailor their messages, including those that promote programs. As shown in Table 11.4, e-mail remains the most simple form of two-way communication, but newer forms of real-time interactivity (e.g., chat rooms) were becoming more popular by the end of the decade.

Program Promotion Online

In the data collected for this chapter, 166 individual local, syndicated, and network programs were promoted online. Of those, most of the promotion, by far, was for local shows. As in previous research, three common threads of local shows were commonly touted: 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 was the exception. The next table of findings reports the kind of promotion carried online (in other words, whether the content was for local programs such as early-evening and late newscasts, syndicated reruns, or first-run network programs). The findings spell out the proportion of each of the three kinds of programs that television stations with different affiliations chose to promote on their web sites. The goal was to see if web promotion was unusually selective by type of program and whether the pattern of affiliates of some networks differed markedly from their competitors's patterns. No comparable data was reported for earlier studies.

Table 11.5 demonstrates that nearly all affiliates focus on local programming in their web sites. Only in the case of the WB (83.3%), whose affiliates are often the fifth or sixth stations in the market, is the affiliates' commitment less than total to promoting local programs. (In this table, the lower

TABLE 11.5
Cross-Tabulation of Aired 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

percentages mean that affiliates of that network promoted fewer of their programs of that kind online, irrespective of what they did in print and on the air.)

Syndicated programming provides another story entirely. The four most commonly cited syndicated shows were *Home Improvement*, *Oprah*, *Ricki Lake*, and *Jerry Springer*. Only UPN affiliates promoted all their syndicated programs (100%). Fox affiliates, traditionally the oldest of the once-independent stations in each market, were more likely to promote local programs (local = 100%, syndicated = 80%, network = 86.7%), which is rather surprising because many Fox affiliates lack much by way of local programs. NBC affiliates, often the earliest in their respective markets to have a strong web presence, were very unlikely to promote their syndicated shows (52.3%). With regard to promotion of network shows, the six commercial stations in the 1999 sample showed strong commitment to promoting most network shows, although public stations apparently felt no such obligation. The four network shows that were most commonly cited were *ABC World News Tonight*, *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*, *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*, and *JAG*.

Because merchandising and contesting are other aspects of promotion, tracking their use is an important aspect of understanding how web sites are used to promote programming, but the sole study before this current one to report such data was Rosales and Pitts (1997). They reported that all the stations they sampled used their sites for station promotion, and noted that 47% used web sites for marketing such products or services as station souvenir items and social activities.

Merchandising and Contesting

In the current study, the researcher found that about one fourth of stations (24.3%) were pushing the envelope of standard banner-and-listing program promotion by merchandising their stations using commercial tie-ins to product sales. Merchandise offers ranged from program-related items (T-shirts, ball caps, souvenirs, videos) to flowers, magazines, and advertising coupons. More unusual offerings—defying 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 in order 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 on stations' web sites, showing that they targeted more than the usual audience with online content.

Although contesting, in the form of giveaways and sweepstakes, has been used on-air and in print media for decades by promotion managers, 27% of the web sites in this analysis also contained contest information. Stations that ran online contests used the same sort of 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. More interesting was the fact that two stations exploited the graphic/textual nature of web pages to offer crossword-type puzzles. The findings about merchandising and contesting suggest that traditional promotional practices are beginning to move to a new venue.

Discussion of This Study

In addition to some general features tracked in most studies of web sites, this study assessed 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 thus which should have the most promotional value for stations. The first research question asked about the stylistic elements characterizing online promotion at the present time and the second research question asked about changes in features over time. The results showed that stylistic elements have been measured in such different ways that comparison becomes problematic, but the general trend seems to be that sites have become more visual (with photographs, streaming video) and more interactive (more e-mail, more features), while at the same time becoming less cluttered and probably promoting program (and stations) more effectively.

Nowadays, stations that are more effective at promotion strive to simplify the promotional message instead of trying to do too much (see Eastman's 1999 guidelines in which "less is more"), and this message seems to have moved to the online world. It may be that limiting the length of scrolling pages and cutting back on text are effective ways for stations to create an uncluttered web site, at least as suggested by the recent industry practices tracked here.

Comparisons of online and on-air practices can illuminate the special characteristics of web sites and the promotion they carry. One of the main

dissimilarities (and a clear benefit) between web-based promotion and conventional on-air promotion, for example, is the ready availability of free space online. Web sites can go on and on with little additional cost, whereas on-air promotion has a time-scarcity value, and spots are frequently bumped to make room for paid commercial messages, with the uncommon exception of fixed-position promotion (see Ferguson & Moses, 1999). Moreover, display space in newspapers, on outdoor billboards, and on the radio is also not free. 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, however, is that the chronologies of program schedules are not reinforced by the use of stand-alone promotional messages on web sites. Another drawback is that proper rotation of promotional messages is not maintained at present on web sites, often because updating online material has not been a high priority (not, at least, in comparison to stations' emphasis on 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 is not likely to become a high priority.

Another dissimilarity is the widespread use of generic promotion online as compared to the use of specific promos on-air. One of Eastman's (1999) design guidelines reads, "Use specifics more often than generics for programs" (p. 53). Clearly, web promotion should use more specific promotion of programs, but it is unlikely to do so until stations see the need to have better rotation of messages. It may be that the greatest similarity between contemporary online promotion and conventional offline promotion is in the way that online 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 web promotional strategy of many stations is to create or reinforce awareness through a simple listing of program titles, rather than persuading through a unique selling proposition, a far more effective approach.

Another way to identify the similarities and dissimilarities is to examine the promotional activities that local television stations do "off-web." For example, the amount of local news promotion online is probably very similar to offline promotion. Ferguson and Moses (1999) identify local news promotion as key to the local effort, and not surprisingly, this study found local news promotion quite prominent on a very large number of local sites.

The third research question asked about the role of network affiliation, and the findings for 1999 suggested that the quantity of web sites, if not quality, seemed to track station's Nielsen ratings, in that large market stations and top-rated stations were more likely to have web sites and to have developed program promotion on them. As network web 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 have been 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 Three networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) were busy in the late-1990s acquiring Internet services and becoming web portals (e.g., ABC's go.com and NBC's snap.com), suggesting that the networks will only become more active in promotion online.

The fourth research question addressed the sources of promotion, and they were shown to be poorly indicated in previous studies, only sketchily revealed in this study, and a fruitful area for future research. The last research question asked about the prevalence of online contesting, and results showed that just over a quarter of television stations in 1999 attempted it, but this approach to promotion can be expected to grow because it can make innovative use of the unique features of online in new types of games and contests.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Ferguson, Eastman, and Klein (1999) identify three basic strategies for promotional messages: acquisitive, competitive, and retentive. In other words, stations seek to acquire more audience, take away their competitors' audiences, and retain their loyal audience. The relative importance given by stations to these goals differs according to the medium. For example, commercial television is much more tilted to acquisitive strategies than are commercial radio stations, which focus more on retentive strategies (Ferguson, Eastman, & Klein, 1999). This present examination of 1999 promotional practices online suggests that building loyalty (retentive strategy) may be most important as web usage proliferates, further indicating that online promotion has a closer similarity to the radio model than to the television model. Certainly, the use of competitive strategies has not reached its potential (Kiernan & Levy, 1999).

Cross-Media Promotional Analyses

Researchers should undertake to compare web promotion with nonweb promotion for particular media. One way to assess the importance of the web as a promotional tool for the electronic media is to survey the people directly involved with on-air and on-web promotion and ask them about their strategies, as opposed to inferring station goals from the promotional messages and practices, the approach that most studies cited in this chapter have taken. In any case, the identity that a web visitor can associate with a specific station site is more important than the image the station projects. Constantly reinventing the web interface and tinkering with the page appearance may actually work against a strong web identity. Promotion managers need to know the reasons why broadcast audiences initially visit station web sites, a subject accessible using such conventional research methods as focus groups and surveys.

Furthermore, stations need to give the web visitors good reasons to make repeat visits, and unlike with conventional promotional practices (such as on-air promos, display advertising, billboards), the intended audience must seek out the information. This fact may constitute the most important dissimilarity between web-based promotion and all the rest, and again, evidence might best be gathered directly from the promotion staff for the various electronic media, and compared to reports of users of two paired kinds: those who stay long and short lengths of time with a station's pages and those who repeatedly visit a site or visit just one time.

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 accomplish 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.

Improving Methodologies and Reporting

Although quantitative content analysis reduces data to comparable counts and categories, it is usually ineffective for getting a complete descriptive picture of complexities. For example, the finding that nearly all stations promote local programs does not speak to the range of activity. In the analysis conducted for this chapter, the kinds of promotion ran the gamut from a great deal to very little, but all were coded nominally (as "yes"), when interval-level data (or qualitative reports) might have been more useful.

Table 11.6 summarizes various statistics about the features of the 179 web sites analyzed for this chapter in the hopes that future studies will also report more details. Reporting means, standard deviations, and ranges provides insights not available in simple proportions of presence and absence. For example, the use of photographs averaged 25.3 per station site studied, but the skewed distribution put the median at only 12

TABLE 11.6
Statistical Summary of Stylistic Elements Related to Web Sites

	Mean	*Mode*	*Median*	*SD*	*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

pictures because of outliers having hundreds of photographs, indicating the range of variation is enormous. Moreover, more sites by far utilize graphics in preference to real photographs, although indexes that combine elements to create estimates of complexity or sophistication may weigh the absence of photographs negatively. Also, the average number of streaming videos (5.9) per site in this study should not be confused with the percentage of stations with streaming video reported in Table 11.3. What the table shows is very little use of streaming video, although all experts predict the technology will rapidly become more common.

Future research must contend with the selection of meaningful data. Some studies, including this one, chose things to count merely because they could be easily counted. In investigating promotion, for example, it would seem advisable to move away from the focus on home pages to look at whole sites, and to move away from the page as the unit of analysis and more toward the station's total effort in all media. It may be that expenditure in one area—such as online—actually results in a reduction in another area such as print or display promotion. Although the number of channels (and web sites) are likely to remain relatively slow growing when compared to the number of web pages and links, investigating all the pages will result in larger, more complete databases and force researchers to develop a nomenclature for the different kinds of promotion happening online. Then, tightly focused studies looking at a single set of variables can be conducted, if it is clear what the set comprises and excludes. Besides, keeping track of fewer variables than in "site description studies" is more parsimonious and likely to be associated with more theoretically based research. Qualitative data can be collected alongside the numerical data and associated with categorical findings if necessary to provide a context or interpretation.

Sampling, however, remains an issue in most kinds of content analysis, and the study of web sites is no different. Unfortunately, no perfect sampling frames for web sites are possible because of 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)?

Enough exploratory research has been done to start testing some assumptions about web pages. For example, what goals are being realized (or not) by stations on their web pages? Researchers need to confirm the role of market size in relation to assumptions about end user technology and the resulting utilization of advanced features in sites. Looking in another direction, how do online techniques used in promotional messages trigger such cognitive processes as memory, arousal, and recognition? In laboratory experiments, online promotion could more readily be manipulated in realistic and undetectable ways than print or videotape, thus lending itself to investigations into cognitive processing.

With regard to the use of web sites by networks and production companies, there is a stunning lack of published research. The topic of branding has received much industry attention in the 1990s, and trade magazines have devoted considerable attention to the ways such well-known companies as NBC and Disney associate their names with new products and services, especially online, but Bellamy and Traudt, (chap. 5, this volume) report the first scholarly look at the branding phenomenon in media. As over-the-air broadcasting fades as the dominant means of distribution of television and radio, brand-name entertainment industries will need to increase and enhance their online presence. On the economic front, big media companies will need to expand into ownership of as many channels of online distribution as possible, just as mergers and buyouts have consolidated the broadcast and cable fields. Future research should address this likely direction by collecting baseline data before big changes become evident, and the developments in online promotion are relevant aspects.

Significance of the Research Ahead

The results of a half-decade of research seem to demonstrate that the Internet will become central rather than peripheral to stations' promotional efforts. Although the station promotion director may have been content to think of the Internet as a medium that was a supplement to on-air and print in 1995, by the turn of the century its importance is clearer. In the near future, web pages will soon become of equal (or greater) importance than more traditional venues for station promotion, especially for attracting the young viewer so desired by advertisers (and thus stations). The key element is interactivity. The Internet permits the broadcast audience to "pull" information about a station, rather than follow the old "push" model. The ease with which stations can poll the audience can also help in schedule planning and decisions about promotional approaches. As the quotation at the start of this chapter suggests, the

Internet makes the old network-affiliate model less relevant and the model of a locally oriented station more important.

To move to this point of a more local orientation, stations must commit more resources to web sites (Polon, 1999). Station engineers must provide better servers, and promotion staffs must find better ways of presenting and updating information. As the usability of site content improves, the possibilities inherent in advertising and merchandising suggest the means for funding a deeper commitment to an online presence. Above all, reasons must be found for web users to visit the station's web site on a regular basis, and cross-promotion between on-air and on-web messages, following the models of *ABC World News Tonight* and the Public Broadcasting Service, both of which have given cross-promotion a high priority on the air. Research about what kinds of cross-promotion is being undertaken is needed, as well as studies looking at its impact on viewing and web usage. Researchers should assess the implications of current trends in online promotion from the perspectives of media companies and from the perspectives of the end users.

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