From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

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A&E

From Art to Vice in the Managed Channel Portfolio

David Craig and Derek Johnson

In the wake of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election, media trade paper *The Hollywood Reporter* inquired whether television programming too would pivot towards the conservative, embracing the irresistible pun to ask "Are We Telling the Right Stories?" (Rose 2016). If the nation's politics had shifted to the right, with conservatives succeeding in part from appeals to white male voters in more rural areas, perhaps this signaled too the market potential in catering to viewer tastes outside of the more socially liberal urban-minded professional audience (Becker 2006) long perceived to dominate industry marketing priorities. Not all television services were behind the curve, however, in thinking about the value of these appeals, and in this moment channels that might have been previously considered lowbrow could offer new guidance and wisdom. Asked to reflect on her channel's long-standing effort to program to rural, white, uneducated male demographics, A&E CEO Nancy Dubuc claimed,

> people in the entertainment community have put their noses up at the kind of programming that we do. Maybe they would be better served by paying a little more attention to actually watching and understanding the stories that we're telling.
>
> (Rose 2016)

Perhaps no other series affirms this better than A&E's highly rated reality series *Duck Dynasty* (2012–2017). The series features a family of backwoods, Louisiana-based, camouflage wearing, Bible-toting entrepreneurs who made their fortune selling duck calling and hunting paraphernalia. The series has also come under criticism for the patriarch's homophobic and transphobic (France 2016; Ford 2013) comments in affirmation of the family's conservative and evangelical beliefs. Described by *Rolling Stone* as "the worst television series of all time" (Sheffield 2016), the series distances A&E from the discourses of "quality" sought by many other cable outlets. Still airing consistently

in reruns on the channel even after its series conclusion, *Duck Dynasty* is only one of several rural and/or working-class reality series that A&E has recently offered, including *American Hoggers* (2011–13), *Cajun Justice* (2012), *Country Bucks* (2014–2015), *Hoarders* (2009–2013, 2016–), and *Live PD* (2016–). In a television industry reconsidering the value of rural, conservative viewers, A&E offered a potential model for other channels to emulate.

Ironically, such accounts of A&E's programming strategies and its credibility outside of the more liberal worldviews typically associated with the entertainment industry operate in some contrast to the channel's initial audience composition and core programming. When the cable channel launched in 1984, it adopted the label the "Arts and Entertainment" Network. As the merger of two early failed cable arts networks, the network's programming featured high arts (dance, painting, opera, symphonies) and acquired documentary, mostly historical, programming. This programming included a decade-long partnership with the BBC and posed direct competition for PBS' acquisitions and co-productions with UK public broadcasters. Within a few years, the network was producing original documentary series and specials, most notably the critically acclaimed series *Biography* (1987–2006), as well as crime-themed documentary series like *City Confidential* (1998–2005). In this light, A&E's recent notoriety as a cable channel more concerned with populist reality television genres and conservative tastes represents not just a market distinction, but also a transformation in channel identity over several decades.

It may be tempting to read this shift in the terms suggested by *Hollywood Reporter*—as a push-and-pull between different demographics, a zero-sum game where television channels switch focus dramatically to pursue the "right" audience with more value. However, the complex history of A&E reveals a creative and strategic process of media management characterized less by major breaks and more an expansion via growing multiplicity of tastes, demographics, and ideologies across a range of subsidiary channel outlets and services. These management practices help us account for the network's seemingly bipolar and highly iterative programming evolution, while also speaking to its polymorphous evolution into multiple networks across multiple platforms.

Although A&E may have started as a single channel on the cable systems that carried it, the channel has since morphed into A+E Television Networks, a multinetwork and multiplatform media brand including channels like History, Lifetime, and, most recently, Viceland. In addition, the company has partnered aggressively with networks and/or partners in 85 countries across more than 90 global channels while also launching a vertically integrated program production system with the launch of A&E Studios. So while the flagship A&E channel may currently prioritize lucrative reality TV entertainment and the ideologies of white rural conservatism, it has never truly abandoned its initial investment in highbrow claims to arts, history, and culture that it fostered along the way. Instead, it repurposes them across its channel portfolio. In this evolution from channel to multi-channel, A&E has invested in a multiplicity of ideologies and taste cultures simultaneously. A&E's recent interest in rural, conservative viewers is not evidence of the primacy of that market so much as its inclusion in a wider, multi-ideological strategy of media channel management.

MANAGING A&E

In the entertainment industries, the idea of management can encompass many different labor roles and types of practices. Johnson, Kompare, and Santo discuss media management broadly in terms of "a culture of shifting discourses, dispositions, and tactics that create meaning, generate value, organize, or otherwise shape media work throughout each moment of production and consumption" (2014, 2). In this chapter, we focus on how the management of A&E as a channel depends on larger structural and cultural conditions that rework and delimit its identities, programming priorities, as well as articulations to specific audiences and taste cultures. As with many other cable networks, the management of A&E has unfolded in pursuit of maximizing the channel's ability to weather persistent disruption from digitization in a multi-channel, post-network era. For A&E, as we will see, the management of that industrial transformation has required the channel to adapt and evolve beyond a single service or market into something that can generate value across a range of different brands, platforms, and experiences. Management, in this sense, is the process of imagining and driving change in what A&E is and how it is perceived to have value at any one point in time.

Thinking about management means considering the human agents behind this process of building, maintaining, and rebuilding value. This can involve attention to specific network executives and other agents of management, analyzing the "roles, opportunities, and constraints" that such creative industry managers face in the course of their work, as Amanda Lotz (2014, 38) suggests. At the same time, an interest in management demands that we consider the priorities, strategies, and interactions of the corporations for which these managers work. It is typical for cable channels to be managed in service of the needs of major media conglomerates that launch and acquire them to provide programming for their cable delivery services, with ownership sometimes changing hands frequently. Across most of its long history, however, A&E could be distinguished by a relatively stable and highly profitable joint ownership across the Disney-ABC, Comcast-NBC-Universal, and Hearst media empires. Only relatively recently in 2012 did the Comcast-NBC-Universal television group sell its stake back to its partners for $3 billion (Andreeva 2012). Each of these three conglomerates has, in their respective histories, experienced volatile shifts in ownership and management, including an emphasis towards vertical and horizontal integration across multiple media industries. However, the nature of the joint venture has inured the network from the same kind of volatile changes in personnel and strategy witnessed by each conglomerate's wholly owned television outlets. Given the need for coordination, communication, and consensus across the strategic interests of multiple stakeholders, the network has been led by only three CEOs and a handful of programming executives across more than three decades. Depending on perspective, the network's management practices either affirm a multilateral culture of leadership or reflect a more irrational approach that places a premium on interpersonal relationships and collaborative dispositions.

Nevertheless, despite this continuity of managerial labor, A&E's evolution as a channel has been more dramatic, perhaps, than another other cable service. Across programming content, audience demographics, and the ideological values ascribed to

both, the management of A&E has depended on an embrace of multiplicity as a means of adapting to industry change. Whether in its attempts to launch spin-off channels or its willingness to match its original emphasis on "arts and entertainment" with more lowbrow appeals, A&E has positioned itself to take advantage of multiple and diverse emerging media markets.

BALANCING ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Launched in February 1984, The Arts and Entertainment Channel was a joint venture compiled from the detritus of two arts-themed cable networks, Hearst/ABC-owned Alpha Repertory Television Service and the RCA/NBC-owned Entertainment Channel. Building on what Newman and Levine (2011) refer to as discourses of distinction and legitimacy, RCA executive Herbert Schlosser claimed that "the newly launched Arts & Entertainment Network is basic cable's last shot at gaining a niche culture and high quality specialized programming" (Crook 1984, 156). The network's management strategy, however, centered on "an expansion of the service's concept from a narrow definition of 'highbrow' fare—restricted largely to the performing and visual arts—to a broad program mix with the emphasis on entertainment" (Knoll 1984, H26). This new framing juxtaposed arts to the value of entertainment in ensuring greater sustainability. In addition to guaranteed placement on major cable systems, the inheritance A&E received from the previous Hearst and RCA channels included an archive of inexpensive arts content plus an exclusive deal for programming from British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The latter strategy would position the network as a direct competitor against underfunded PBS, not only for programming but also managerial expertise. A&E's first head of programming, Curtis Davis, had spent a decade at public TV's old NET production center in New York (O'Connor 1985, H25).

In its first few years, A&E avoided the failure of earlier arts networks by quickly diffusing arts with entertainment. By 1985, the channel had secured syndication deals for former broadcast network programming, including NBC sitcoms *The United States* (1980) and *Buffalo Bill* (1983–1984), as well as a ten-part CBS miniseries about Ben Franklin. Industry analysts read these acquisitions against prior reliance on BBC programming as "a way for A&E to Americanize its line-up and broaden its concept of quality alternative programming" (DiMatteo 1985, 26). Expanding into more populist genres, A&E's first forays into original content production included stand-up comedy series like *Evening at the Improv* (1982–1996) and crime series like *Investigative Reports* (1991–2011) (Goldman 1988, 15). Marketing and branding strategies in trade publications further telegraphed A&E's ambitions to the industry. "A&E only shows opera, ballet and theatrical performances, right?" one three-page advertisement in the trade paper *CableVision* asked. "Wrong . . . A&E brings home more premiers than HBO . . . carries a tune better than MTV . . . entertains the family better than CBN, 'The Family Entertainer'" ("A&E" 1986, 24–7).

This dual arts/entertainment identity presented challenges and even schism within the management of the channel. By the late 1980s, programming chief Peter Hansen mused that despite interest in building higher ratings, "we're not going to become total

slaves to numbers. If we were, we would abandon performing arts altogether. This is a part of what we are" (Taylor 1987, Calendar 6.1). Even as entertainment was used to manage the commercial value of arts programming, A&E tried to quantify its arts commitment, claiming that 45% of the network was "cultural" based on its anthropological, historical, and performing arts programs (Walley 1993a).

Throughout the 1990s, then, A&E continued to seek a balance in its dual high-low programming strategy. A&E renewed its partnerships with the BBC, claiming that "BBC co-productions have served as the 'cornerstone' of programming with the network" (Toumarkine 1991). In 1996, this continuity of strategy would deliver impressive ratings, critical praise, and industry recognition for *Pride and Prejudice*, sold to audiences and Emmy voters as an A&E co-production with the BBC. Along with British cultural heritage programming, a mythic, culturally authorized past would remain a fixture of the channel's programming strategy with its successful *Biography* series, tracing the life stories of historical figures every Monday through Friday at 8 p.m. Yet the most populist and profitable strategy was A&E's acquisition of the off-network rights to the NBC procedural *Law & Order* (1990–2010). A&E paid $180,000 per episode to syndicator MCA-TV (modest in syndication terms but three times more than A&E had ever paid before), and the series would become a massive ratings hit on cable (while also helping to increase the ongoing ratings on NBC). According to MCA's Shelly Schwab, "This puts A&E on a new plateau. The message is that they are now at the same level as several other cable networks in bidding for mainline product" (Walley and Tyrer 1994, 3).

CANNIBALIZATION IN THE MULTI-CHANNEL PORTFOLIO

Throughout the 1990s, A&E faced increasing competition from channels like Bravo that offered their own performing arts programming, which called into question the value of trying to keep a foot on base in that genre even as it pursued mainline entertainment. The multiplication of A&E from a single channel into a portfolio of distinct channels thus helped resolve its dual identity while maintaining its multiple investments across different markets and taste cultures. In 1994, A&E launched the History Channel (then HTV), capitalizing on its existing library of historic and military-themed documentary programming (Walley 1993b, 36). In 1999, A&E launched two additional services: The Biography Channel carved out a dedicated space for the vast *Biography* library (and similar acquired programming) while History Channel International offered a uniquely global spin on historical programming. While *Biography* remained a staple of the original A&E schedule for some time, this multiplication of services allowed the A&E flagship to surrender to other parts of the channel portfolio the genres that did not fit with its continued evolution toward entertainment. In other words, building from a single channel into a portfolio was part of a cannibalistic process of generic management that provided new channel space for programming in which the multi-channel network maintained long-term investment, even as non-"entertainment" genres fell by the wayside on A&E.

Yet by the early 2000s, growth in ratings and returns to investors took a dramatic downturn. A decade of efforts to carve out managed spaces of specialization across the

channel portfolio had the unintended effect of exacerbating the audience fragmentation that had already made for fierce competition in cable television. Further weakening the channel's claim to mainline entertainment was its refusal to renew its *Law & Order* deal at significantly higher costs. By October of 2002, A&E ratings dropped almost 30% from their 2000 peak, with many of those lost viewers following *Law & Order* to cable competitor TNT. These losses led to rare upheaval in the executive ranks, with the replacement of the network's general manager, head of programming, and head of marketing (Umstead and Forkan 2002, 1).

In response, A&E made one last effort to reinvest in its potential as a highbrow cultural destination, hiring veteran network and cable programmer Allen Sabinson (Higgins 2000). Having helped Showtime and TNT become destination viewing in the cable market, Sabinson had a reputation for supporting critically acclaimed and highly rated programming, particularly in original television movies. Consequently, A&E's programming shifted to tony original dramas, including filmmaker Sidney Lumet's return to television after a half century. Legal drama *100 Centre Street* (2001–2002) was hailed for giving A&E "instant prestige" (Pennington 2001). The network also launched the period detective drama *A Nero Wolfe Mystery* (2001–2002), based on the classic series by Rex Stout. Within two years, however, both series were cancelled and Sabinson was out. Acknowledging the challenges of balancing high/low appeals in this multi-channel moment, CEO Nick Davatzes acknowledged "we cannibalized ourselves" before retiring and handing control over to Abbe Raven (Dempsey 2002).

FROM ART TO VICE

While Raven had impressively risen the ranks from Davatzes's secretary to general manager, her long history with the network did not determine her programming strategies. Raven quickly installed a team of executives expert in tapping into audiences' interest in reality programming. As head of "alternative programming." Senior Vice President Nancy Dubuc launched series about bounty hunters (*Dog the Bounty Hunter*, 2004–2012), mafia families (*Growing Up Gotti*, 2004–2005), rock star families (*Gene Simmons Family Jewels*, 2006–2012), goth magicians (*Criss Angel: Mindfreak*, 2005–2010), tattoo artists (*Inked*, 2005–2006), and addicts (*Intervention*, 2005–)—converting the network from arts and entertainment into the entertainment of everyday life, often in ways perceived as voyeuristic and salacious. By 2008, Dubuc took charge of programming for History, too, where she equally applied these strategies. As industry veteran J. M. Pressley lamented,

> History Channel abandons history in favor of ratings. . . . Under her watch, A&E went from featuring a mix of fine arts, documentaries, and original literary screen adaptations to a pastiche of reality series shamelessly pandering to the lowest common denominator . . . A&E by the end of Ms. Dubuc's tenure had utterly devolved into a jaded reality freak show on parade. . . . History will be another A&E within the next few years.
>
> (Pressley 2008)

While perhaps overstating A&E's prior focus on the highbrow, this critique identifies other channels like History as a long-time means of preserving some legacy cultural programing on the margins of the channel portfolio. Yet against the diversity of this channel multiplicity loomed fear about entertainment creep and the end of arts, history, and the like.

This shift in A&E's programming formats and content was accompanied by growing appeals to the socially and culturally conservative market that had been underserved by prior determination to use "quality" programming as a means of securing younger, upscale, urban viewers. The top-rated A&E series *Duck Dynasty* illustrates this dynamic—particularly in the controversy surrounding remarks that on-screen patriarch Phil Robertson made about the "sin" of "homosexual behavior" in a December 2013 *GQ* interview prior to the fifth season premiere. When these remarks went public, A&E suspended Robertson from the series, declaring the incompatibility of his words with the network's corporate commitment to "unity, tolerance and acceptance among all people" (Ford 2013). Yet for media analysts like Porter Bibb, this controversy represented a "win-win" scenario for A&E: while the channel could distance itself from Robertson and claim prosocial corporate enlightenment, the temporary nature of the suspension would allow continued production of a valuable reality franchise and affirm the industrial value of socially conservative politics (Fixmer 2013). With the series attracting 14.6 million viewers per episode and generating $480 million in combined advertising and merchandising revenue for A&E, the channel could hardly afford to keep Robertson sidelined (particularly if it meant non-cooperation from the rest of his co-starring family members). Moreover, the inevitable end of the suspension permitted a moral victory of sorts for religious groups who used the controversy as an opportunity to express support for Robertson's socially conservative values in opposition to the presumed corporate liberalism of A&E. Faith2Action, an Ohio-based family values advocacy group, organized a website called MailtheDuck.com to send rubber ducks to A&E in protest. The win-win of the controversy, then, emerges from A&E's opportunity to disavow one ideological premise while seeming to capitulate to consumer demands devoted to another.

A&E has similarly courted regressive political ideologies in its development of *Generation KKK* (2016), a docu-series exploring everyday participants in white supremacist movements. The channel notably worked to disavow any endorsement of the politics being represented. Disclaimers promised that "The following program explores how hatred and prejudice are born and bred in our country." Meanwhile, A&E general manager Rob Sharenow clarified, "We certainly didn't want the show to be seen as a platform for the views of the KKK." He continues, "The only political agency is that we really do stand against hate" (Shattuck 2016). Yet as critic Nick Shrager (2016) countered, the series

> does something worse than just provide a platform for the KKK. It employs the formal format and devices of the channel's other hits (*Hoarders, Intervention*) to transform its bigots into colorful characters, thereby placing them on the same plane as the rest of cable TV's freaky reality stars.

In other words, *Generation KKK* worked to normalize and legitimize white supremacy, making it just another troubling but entertaining and sympathetic part of everyday life.

Duck Dynasty and *Generation KKK* represent extremes in which racist and homophobic ideologies serve a role in the management of A&E's market appeals, where new space is carved out for cultural and ideological sensibilities beyond the highbrow content A&E once promised. Yet while these shifts suggested a reorganization of identity for A&E, the management of the channel portfolio sustained simultaneous interest in the upscale markets, tastes, and ideologies that might seem to be abandoned. By 2017, the network's programming featured critically-acclaimed series about children with Down's Syndrome (*Born This Way*) and former members of Scientology (*Leah Remini: Scientology and the Aftermath*). Nonetheless, after a decade of failed, low performing efforts, the network abandoned its scripted drama series strategy, including planned remakes of mini-series *Roots*, to "return to its roots" in non-fiction programming (Andreeva 2017). These roots, however, referred not to arts or history programming; rather the network refocused on crime-themed programming like *60 Days In* and *Live P.D.*, which, in turn, would compliment another cable channel in the A+E umbrella, Crime and Investigation.

A+E's diverse, if seemingly contradictory, ideological management strategy is reflected in their investment in Viceland. Founded in Montreal in 1994 as a "punk" publication focused on arts, culture, and entertainment, then becoming a cross-platform journalism, film, recording, and publishing imprint, Vice Media entered a deal with A+E Networks in 2015 to create a new Vice television channel (replacing H2, the former History Channel International, in cable lineups). According to the *New York Times*, the deal represented effort to "diversify" the A+E portfolio and help it attract more male viewers as well as younger Millennials while giving Vice better advertising inroads (Ember 2015). Young and urbane, the joint cable venture named Viceland represents, at least on its surface, an antithesis to the worlds of homophobic duck hunting and racist hatemongering that might define the flagship A&E channel in the same cultural and industrial moment. In sum, while A&E specializes in one niche in the television market, A+E has developed a strategy of managed multiplicity across a portfolio of channels to hedge its bets across numerous genres, markets, tastes, and ideologies.

CONCLUSION

A&E continues to pivot, reaching backwards to relaunch venerable and acclaimed series like *Biography* while leaping sideways to make deals with social media platform Snapchat. Meanwhile, it had disavowed decades of efforts in scripted programming to focus more exclusively on "non-fiction series." The shifts have been described as "returning to its roots" (Andreeva 2017), although, as described here, the network's history is one of rhizomatic, managed multiplicity without a singular, unitary form. A&E's volatile management practices and dramatic shifts in programmatic could be seen as strategic attempts to resecure value in a shifting field of competition. Or, they could reveal management in a state of panic in response to ongoing industrial disruption. Or these

practices could simply be habitual, like a gambler compulsively placing chips on every number at the roulette table.

While A&E has pursued many markets, tastes, and politics at once, not every one of these has proven to be a perennial focus; in the shuffling of focus across so many different eras and sister channels, some genres like performing arts and history programming have been hybridized, cannibalized, or weeded out in favor of other possibilities with more value to those charged with stewarding the strategic orientation of the channel. One might consider that a process of evolution in which only the strongest programming survives. However, it may be more instructive to consider it as a process of management in which corporate decision makers seek to negotiate shifting industrial conditions and, throughout that practice, shape and reshape the perceived value of the channel and its offerings. As the case of A&E shows, that value is one that can be managed through articulation (Hall and Grossberg 1996, 141)—a process of linking, delinking, and relinking the channel to different cultural formations of genre, taste, and ideology. Articulating art to vice and everything in between, A&E represents the potential for channels to be multiple in their values, unfixed over time and across the portfolios in which they are embedded.

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