From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Johnson, Derek, 1979– editor.
Title: From networks to Netflix : a guide to changing channels / [edited by] Derek Johnson.
Description: New York : Routledge, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017038503 | ISBN 9781138998490 (hardback) | ISBN 9781138998513 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781315658643 (ebk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Television viewers—Effect of technological innovations on. | Television broadcasting—Technological innovations—United States. | Streaming technology (Telecommunications)
Classification: LCC HE8700.66.U6 F76 2018 | DDC 302.23/45—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017038503

ISBN: 978-1-138-99849-0 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-99851-3 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-65864-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Warnock Pro
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

CBS All Access

To Boldly Franchise Where No One Has Subscribed Before

Derek Johnson

In January 1995, a 15-year-old television viewer in Rockford, Illinois struggled with a problem of channel access. Although local broadcast station WQRF-Channel 39 had long carried first-run episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994) and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993–1999), it would not air the next spin-off in the long-running space exploration franchise. While Paramount Television had previously syndicated these series to local stations on an individual basis, *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001) would only be available to stations that became affiliates of the brand new United Paramount Network (UPN) by adopting its network identity and entire programming schedule. The new network and series would launch as one. Unfortunately, Rockford had lost its last non-affiliated broadcaster when WQRF signed with the Fox network in 1989. Although dual affiliations were possible (typically requiring one network's programming to air in off-peak hours), no Rockford station opted to join UPN. Consequently, *Voyager* would not launch in that market.

A glance at *TV Guide*, however, showed this viewer that stations in nearby broadcast markets had affiliated with UPN: Chicago's WPWR-Channel 50 and Madison's WISC-Channel 3. Although his family had accessed local broadcast channels through cable provider Cablevision for several years, a rotating aerial antenna remained mounted to the roof of their house. Reconnecting the control dial, he spent hours before the Monday, January 16 premiere fine-tuning to maximize reception of these distant over-the-air signals. On launch night, however, reception from Chicago failed. The next night, he turned the antenna toward Madison, where WISC, as a dual UPN/CBS affiliate, held the premiere until Tuesday; but again, brief moments of clarity gave way to static. This viewer simply lacked access to the channel that could provide continued access to the franchise.

This story of thwarted viewing in a bygone broadcast era seems far removed from streaming video on demand and plentiful access to television content. Yet its emphasis on the efforts (some) viewers will make to access desirable content makes a perfect entrée for considering how emerging over-the-top services like CBS All Access use familiar franchises to incentivize viewer embrace of online delivery and its accompanying costs. Named to valorize the access it provides, the CBS streaming service launched in October 2014, adapting advertising-supported, domestic broadcast network economies to subscription-based online distribution. CBS All Access subscribers paid $5.99 monthly to stream the kind of programs that CBS, since forming as a radio network in 1927 and moving into television in 1941, had elsewhere provided viewers for free (or rather, in exchange for exposure to advertising). The service included live streams of the local broadcast feeds CBS affiliates continued to deliver over-the-air, as well as a library of historical television programs to which CBS Studios owned the rights, from *I Love Lucy* to *CSI*. While All Access introduced a $9.99 subscription option for ad-free on-demand content in 2017, the service remained embedded in broadcast economies through the persistence of advertising in the standard package as well as in all affiliate live streams. The service did not, therefore, fully extract CBS or its audiences from older broadcast models.

Yet CBS did need to motivate subscription to this new means of accessing its network, and the practice of using highly desired content to encourage viewers to gain access—or as often, to maintain it—remained central to efforts to support the service. CBS All Access promised a year after launch it would "accelerate" growth by investing in renewed production of the *Star Trek* franchise—in this case, *Star Trek: Discovery*, envisioned as the service's "first original series" ("New" 2015). Just as UPN had

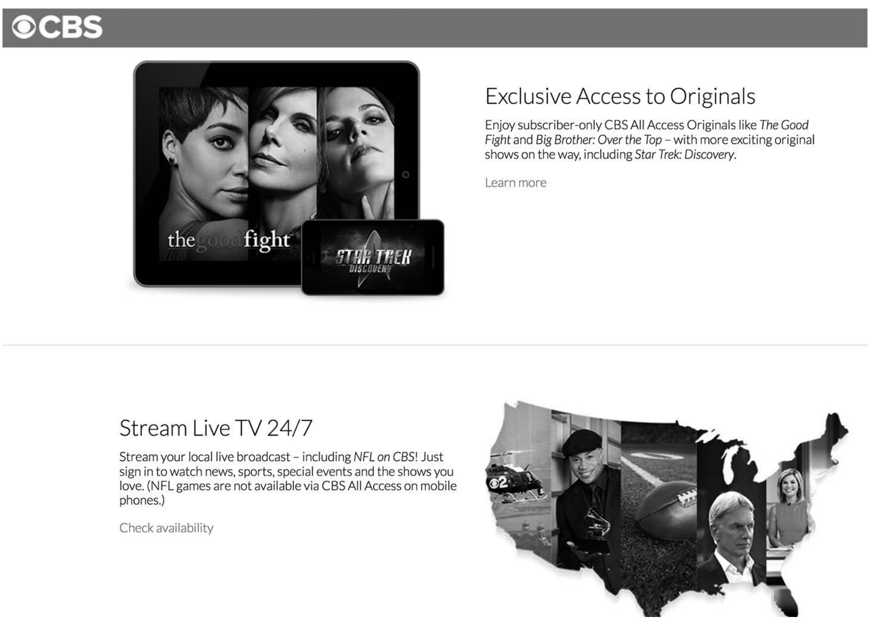

FIGURE 37.1 *CBS All Access promoted its streaming service through appeals to exclusive premium content and continued access to broadcast feeds.*

previously wagered, CBS All Access exploited exclusive claim to new franchise product to compel consumers to gain access—this time, not by fumbling with antennas, but by paying subscription fees.

By considering how CBS All Access used established broadcast television franchises to motivate subscription to its streaming business, we can learn much about the persistent power of content in disaggregated, unbundled industrial environments. While proliferating streaming channels compete as standalone, over-the-top services actively chosen by viewers (not included by default in cable bundles), content franchises offer built-in appeal to support demand for access. Beyond this, CBS All Access franchising strategies reveal the industrial challenges of building bridges between broadcasting and streaming. While exclusive original content like *Discovery* facilitated CBS' adaptation to premium streaming economies, this strategy simultaneously evoked the broadcast origins of both network and franchise as well as their continued articulations to that industrial model—prompting consumer questions about the value of streaming compared to broadcast. To explore these ideas, we can first contextualize this franchise strategy within the initial priorities of CBS All Access between 2015 and 2017. Second, we can address the specific value *Star Trek* brings as an anchor or flagship for a newly launched channel. Finally, we can trace the limits of this strategy by considering the responses of would-be subscribers when presented with new access barriers to franchises previously available through broadcast channels. While CBS All Access relied upon legacy franchise power to lead audiences to a premium subscription economy, it simultaneously confronted the challenges of adapting broadcast legacies to that streaming environment.

ACCESS GRANTED

Whereas upstart broadcast networks like UPN suffered from poor affiliate coverage and resulting lack of audience access, CBS All Access promised easy content access to anyone with a broadband connection and the monthly fee. At launch, the service provided over 5,000 episodes of programming, including full runs of *Cheers, MacGyver*, and, of course, *Star Trek* (Ellingson 2014). That programming library grew as CBS Studios produced more television content; because long-term exploitation rights typically belong to studios producing programming, anything CBS Studios made (aired on the CBS broadcast network or not) could eventually augment this library. CBS did often license its library programs in parallel to competing streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, or Hulu. Yet these agreements typically extended temporary, non-exclusive streaming rights to individual programs and did not represent a wholesale commitment to making all CBS Studios content available on competing services. In other words, the comparative value of All Access came at least in part from full access to the larger library CBS controlled.

In this context, exclusive programming like *Discovery* not intended to be shared with these competitors served as "premium" content—or, as CBS CEO Les Moonves puts it, "content to die for" (Pascale 2017b). The idea that audiences might be led to specific channels by desirable content recalls long-standing industry discourses about the power of programming, often expressed in the adage "content is king" (Dumenco 2014; Lafayette 2016; Neff 2011). The primacy of content is by no means accepted fact; in the age of streaming, especially, many experts believe the distributional and infrastructural control enjoyed by tech companies like Google, Netflix, or Facebook provides more competitive edge than control over any specific content (Knee 2011; Raddon 2016). In this debate over content versus distributional hegemony, CBS hedged its bets with All Access. CBS could retain control and internalize the value of its content library while developing a new online distribution channel of its own (no longer at the mercy of other companies' streaming pipelines). Nevertheless, the centrality of media franchising to CBS All Access programming strategy demonstrates that the reproduction of recognizable content with proven audience demand remained a crucial means of supporting television services given the abundance of choice among different channels and services.

Media franchising is the logic through which industries reuse proven intellectual properties (like a successful television show) to generate more content across different sites, moments, and contexts of production; this supports both multiplication of cultural production and processes of reproduction that facilitate exchange of creative resources across different institutions, moments, creative communities, and industry sectors (Johnson 2013, 3–4). In television development, this production logic most commonly manifests in "spin-off" practices that use already successful characters, settings, or brands to support new creative endeavors (2013, 67; Gitlin 2000, 64). Spun-off from a familiar franchise formula, *Discovery* poses less risk than a more original concept. However, the CBS All Access franchising strategy went beyond defraying development risks to additionally enhance the value of the existing library. The original production strategy publicly championed by All Access between 2015 and 2017 revolved around creating new iterations of existing CBS franchises; beyond *Discovery*, CBS promised spin-offs of *The Good Wife* (a legal melodrama that aired on CBS from 2009 to 2016) and *Big Brother* (the ongoing reality television format launched by CBS in 2000, which had already supported experimentations with subscriptions for exclusive online content). Although CBS intended *Discovery* as the first original All Access series, repeated production delays meant that *Good Wife* spin-off *The Good Fight* launched first in 2017. CBS promotional material explicitly noted the added value this spin-off would bring to older *Good Wife* episodes in the All Access library. "Remember that every episode of *The Good Wife* is available on demand with CBS All Access," one press release noted. "Looking to catch up on this series? Check out *The Good Wife* Binge-Watch Guide which highlights key episodes and important moments you need to know" ("Good" 2016). A franchise strategy thus increases the value of library access to the parent series for viewers following a spin-off into the streaming environment.

In this way, the CBS All Access strategy paralleled efforts of other studios to "revive" production of library series, where the creation of valuable new television content also enhanced the value of older episodes. On the basis of the increased "leverage" and visibility afforded by renewed production of *The X-Files* (FOX, 1993–2002), for example, 20th Century Fox could ask higher license fees from Netflix for older episodes (Barr 2015). With *Discovery* in the pipeline, CBS could similarly demand higher license fees from Netflix or Amazon for the previous *Star Trek* series; but it had even more leverage

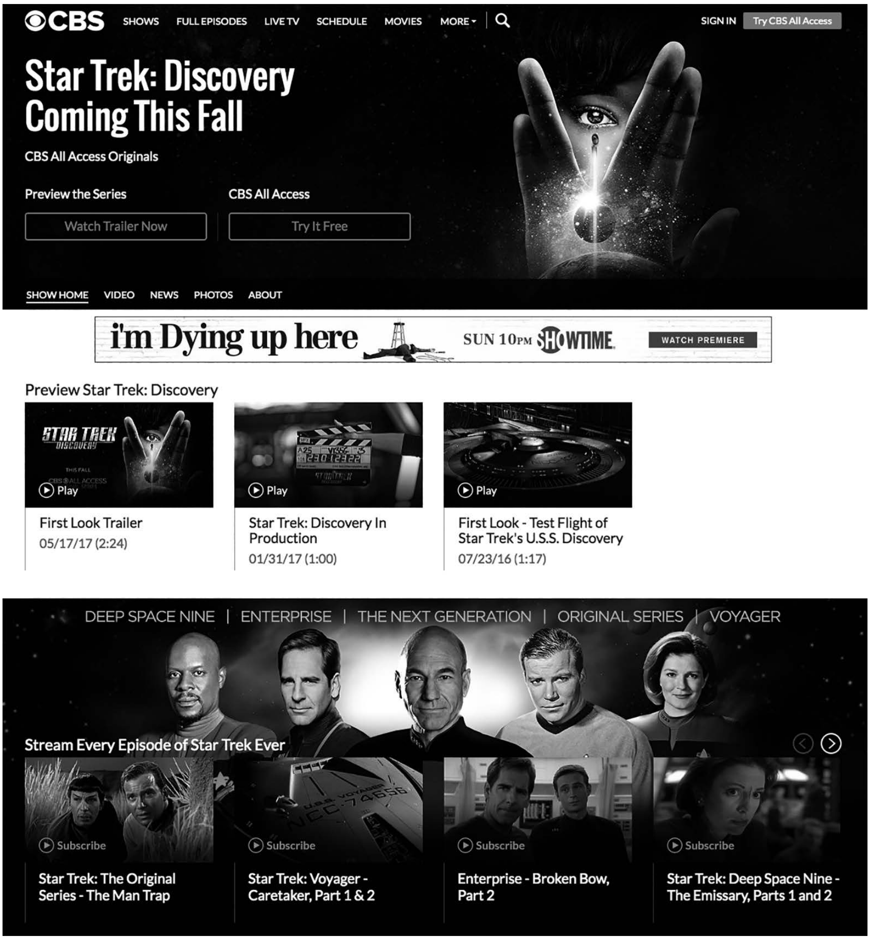

FIGURE 37.2 *Anticipation for* Star Trek: Discovery *in 2017 offered leverage to bring new value to the entire library of franchise series.*

because it could always retain exclusive rights and enjoy their value on All Access. As analyst Cynthia Littleton argues, the worth of programming in development in this context is determined "by how much it will contribute to the intrinsic value of its commissioning network or digital platform as part of a library of shows available en masse for years to come" (2017, 2).

These franchising practices also provided some leverage in encouraging traditional broadcast affiliates to participate in the new online network economy of CBS All Access. Reflecting its domestic market emphasis, CBS promised to air the first *Discovery* episode on its broadcast network (as it did for *Good Fight*) ("New" 2015) and signed a deal that ceded international distribution to Netflix ("Netflix" 2016). Yet following the premiere of the new series on September 24, 2017, CBS reserved all subsequent episodes exclusively for All Access within the US. This effectively blocked legacy CBS affiliates from participation in the program beyond episode one—unless they chose to contribute to the new online domestic service. Syncbak software embedded in the platform allowed CBS All Access to detect subscribers' geographic locations and potentially match them to local affiliate programming feeds that offered local programming and syndicated fare in non-network hours outside the prime-time schedule (Spangler 2015). Yet CBS required additional contractual permission from individual affiliate stations to stream those local feeds. Without affiliates, CBS All Access could provide access to the CBS Studios library and emulate the CBS prime-time experience, but it could not duplicate the local character of broadcasting in which CBS had long been domestically embedded. Online subscribers would be asked to pay for CBS without getting all that CBS affiliates made available for free. Exclusive programming thus helped incentivize affiliate participation in All Access, despite the disruption streaming posed to existing network-affiliate relationships (because online CBS no longer needed affiliates to deliver its national network content to viewers). By the end of 2015, over 100 independent affiliates had signed carriage agreements with CBS All Access, enough to offer local programming to 75% of the US market (Winslow 2015). In exchange, each affiliate would receive an undisclosed percentage of subscriber fees paid to CBS—a piece of the action to be driven by *Discovery* and other franchises.

The continuity offered across broadcast and streaming by *Discovery* and *The Good Fight* encouraged audiences and affiliates alike to continue their relationship with CBS to maintain access to those franchises in a new streaming economy. Put another way, these franchises represented not just exclusive content, but an exclusivization of content to which audiences and affiliates previously enjoyed broadcast access. With that exclusivization in mind, we can consider how the specific broadcast legacy of *Star Trek* supported CBS efforts to carve out space in the crowded over-the-top market while also creating confusion about what it meant to be a streaming service compared to a broadcast network.

THE FLAGSHIP FRANCHISE

Echoing the ways UPN used the *Star Trek* franchise as support for launching a new channel, CBS executives too highlighted the value of *Discovery* as a flagship for its growing service. Since acquiring the television rights to *Star Trek* in its merger and later separation with Viacom/Paramount, CBS executives have called the franchise the "family jewel/s" (Goldberg 2015; Pascale 2017b) or the "crown jewel" (Bond 2016) of its library holdings. Through this special value, the *Star Trek* franchise is often framed as uniquely able to deliver upon corporate goals. By February 2017, the CBS All Access subscriber base had grown to almost 1.5 million, up 50% over seven months (Spangler 2017a). Yet Les Moonves nominated *Star Trek* as a vehicle by which the service would aim for eight million by 2020; *Discovery* was the "big kahuna" that would attract even bigger and younger audiences for All Access (which already averaged 20 years younger than the CBS broadcast network) (Pascale 2017a). CBS cagily withheld actual subscriber numbers, yet claimed that the premiere of *Discovery* drove a "record" number of subscriber sign ups for a single day as well as a 64% increase in downloads of the All Access mobile app compared to the previous two weeks (Spangler 2017b).

Similarly, CBS placed unique faith in *Star Trek* to appeal to global buyers and, in doing so, guarantee its own domestic profitability on All Access. Recognizing the success of previous *Star Trek* series on Netflix, Moonves remarked that "Star Trek [Discovery] could have sold anywhere"; and yet he "felt it was odd taking our content, which is the family jewels, and putting it in an organization with our competitors" (Pascale 2017b). Instead, Moonves claimed this franchise power should be brought under the umbrella of CBS' proprietary US streaming platform. Moonves also noted that the "action-adventure" spectacle—only affordable in this emerging market thanks to lucrative international licensing fees from Netflix—would make the series "travel" better (2017b). Indeed, *Variety*'s Cynthia Littleton reported that the "marquee" status of the *Star Trek* franchise "commanded immediate interest from global buyers," leading Netflix to sign an $80 million contract for international rights to the new series as well as the five library series (some 727 episodes) (2017, 7). This arrangement would exceed *Discovery*'s first season production budget of $6–$7 million per episode.

In relying upon *Discovery* as its flagship, CBS All Access participated in an historical valuation of the *Star Trek* franchise (though some might say overvaluation) as a viable support for new television services. In fact, the 1995 launch of *Voyager* as UPN flagship was not the first time television industries sought to launch a new channel on the back of the franchise. As a studio supplier of programming, Paramount Pictures had long sought its own network to gain greater control over distribution, even investing in the

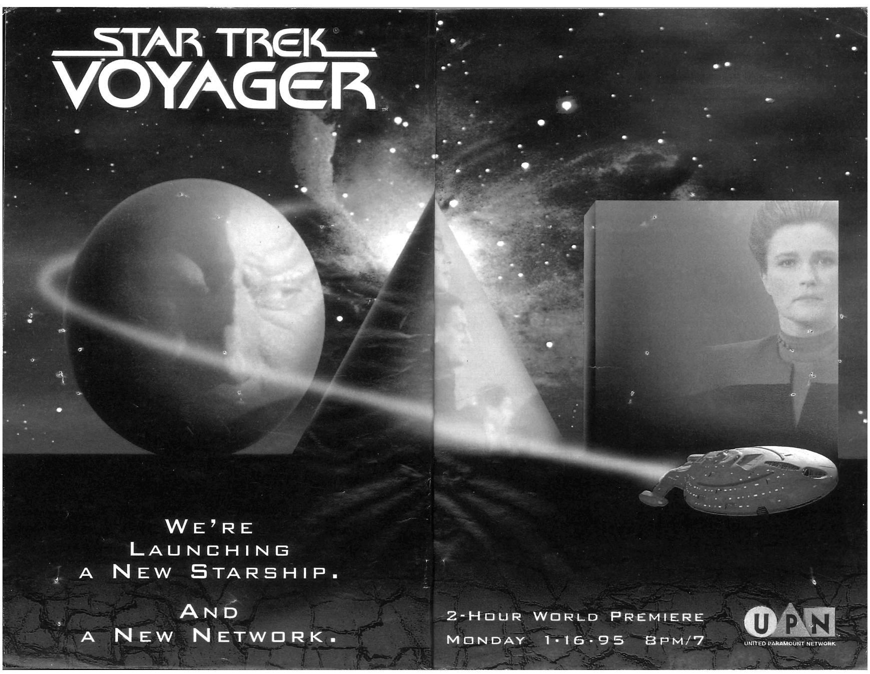

FIGURE 37.3 *A scanned advertisement for the 1995* Star Trek: Voyager *premiere highlights use of the ongoing franchise as support to launch the new UPN network.*

DuMont Network, a failed attempt to sustain a fourth national television network, in the 1950s (Hilmes 1991, 72–4). By 1977, continued efforts led to plans for the Paramount Television Service, a new network that would initially offer its 58 signed affiliates a single night of programming combining original television movies with a new *Star Trek* series ("New" 1977). This spin-off, *Star Trek: Phase II*, would feature the return of William Shatner as Captain Kirk, capitalizing on the continuing success of the original 1966–1969 series in second-run syndication. Because its affiliate network reached only 57% of US households, however, Paramount could not command the same advertising rates as other networks. Disappointing revenue projections led to delay and eventual cancellation of the network's launch (Pearson and Messenger-Davies 2014, 51–2). In the fallout, Paramount redirected plans for *Phase II* into the first *Star Trek* feature film in 1978.

Successful or not, these broadcast era efforts to launch new television services relied upon franchising logic, using revival of successful library product to drive demand from audiences, affiliates, and advertisers alike. To support its own launch of a fourth US network a decade later, FOX too sought the rights to spin-off *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Gendel 1986). At the time, however, Paramount aimed to use the growing market for syndicated programming to sell that new series directly to broadcast stations without the need for a network in first-run. Presaging Les Moonves's comments about *Discovery*, Paramount Television President Mel Harris explained: "since it is one of our family jewels, it made no sense to put it into somebody else's hands for distribution when we had the capability to give it the best possible shot ourselves" (Weinstein 1988). The later reliance of UPN and now CBS All Access on *Star Trek* extended an established broadcast framework for using the franchise to anchor new forms of television distribution.

BROADCAST TELEVISION AS PAY TELEVISION

This deep history accompanying CBS and this use of the *Star Trek* franchise, however, also calls into some question the value of such broadcast legacies in the streaming subscription realm. In a 2017 interview, CBS Interactive's Marc DeBevoise grappled with skepticism about All Access' transformation of a free broadcast service into a subscription purchase. "We totally hear you. We've seen the comments," he acknowledged of criticisms that CBS should put its best programming on its broadcast network rather than using exclusivity to prop up All Access. Yet he countered that "there are only so many slots and programs," as well as broadcast limitations on "the way the story is told and language and things like that" (Adalian 2017). Although *Discovery* promised to turn legions of fans into subscribers—in order to "super-serve those superfans," as DeBevoise puts it—many of these potential viewers resisted the notion that a *Trek* series might newly sit behind a paywall as "premium" content. As both CBS-branded product and a franchise embedded in the histories of broadcast delivery, *Trek* sometimes chafed against its new subscription premise.

Some fan reactions to the initial *Discovery* announcement challenged the exclusivization of the franchise. "First, let's talk about the giant Sehlat in the room," began an article on major fan portal *TrekMovie.com* days after CBS announced the series, highlighting disjuncture between the subscription model and the franchise's broadcast history. "The notion that it would cost money to see the new show upset a lot of people, who resent having to cough up more quatloos in order to watch something they should get over the broadcast airwaves or through their cable subscriptions," authors Brian Drew and Kayla Iacovino (2015) claimed.[1] Here the program's "cost" operated in relative rather than absolute terms: the authors believed US fans would have been "jumping up and down" had the series been announced for Netflix—assuming many already subscribed to that dominant streaming service—whereas the cost of subscribing to CBS All Access specifically for *Discovery* would likely be a new, additional cost. Cable was not free, but it generally included the local CBS channel, making the need to add All Access streaming an increase to an already burdensome cost. Meanwhile, cord cutters who abandoned cable would slowly see overall costs increase if forced to pay for individual subscriptions for all the services carrying desirable but exclusive franchises. Drew and Iacovino also suggested subscription barriers to access could hurt the series' ability to find an audience. Older *Star Trek* fans may not embrace streaming television, they posited, while casual viewers might have reduced chance of exposure to the series if not already subscribed to All Access for another reason.

While Drew and Iacovino glossed over a vast fan discourse, more than 1,000 comments other potential viewers made in response to their analysis, as well to the first *TrekMovie* article relaying CBS' announcement of the series (Drew 2015), fed these debates over the effective value of All Access as a means of accessing *Discovery*. "The problem for me is that CBS All-Access is, by its very nature, limited," wrote one commenter. "I will not pay $6/mo just to watch ONE episode of a show every week." Questioning whether fan viewership would be large enough to support the venture, and citing the mediocre ratings of the UPN series, another offered, "Don't they remember that nobody watched the last couple of series when it was on tv for free?" In this view, the broadcast history of the franchise made its ability to command premium subscriptions uncertain. Indeed, the status of *Discovery* as a product of the legacy broadcast institution CBS, rather than a premium cable outlet like HBO, created additional skepticism. One fan opined, "if you have CBS as part of a paid cable or satellite package . . . CBS All Access should be free similar to apps and other streaming services like HBO GO." The streaming service HBO Go was not, of course, "free" in its own right—but it was included at no extra cost for subscribers to the traditional HBO cable package. By that logic, some believed *Discovery* should be accessible to any viewers served by the original CBS network. A second comparison to HBO centered on the notion of quality, opposing CBS' broadcast legacy to HBO's premium reputation. *Discovery* "would only achieve its full potential if it was on HBO. Instead we have CBS." Skeptical that CBS could convince viewers to pay "for something they used to get for free," another devalued the service by reference to the traditional broadcast genres in which the network had traded: "Who really wants to watch the crappy sitcoms that CBS streams?" The broadcast context from which both CBS and *Star Trek* hailed encouraged many to question whether franchise content could sustain the value of broadcast institutions within the online subscription environment.

No consensus emerged here; even as some thought CBS was "taking for granted" fan willingness to pay, just as many reported eagerness to part with their money.

Nevertheless, these debates pointed to the tensions and challenges accompanying CBS use of franchise content to build bridges between legacy broadcast economies and streaming television. As potential viewers confronted those tensions, they worked through the value of these different forms of television delivery, evaluating not just economic costs, but just as crucially the continued accessibility of franchised television content to an existing viewership. On that point, debates about the merits of All Access often considered differentials in access that some viewers faced. As one fan noted, "there's the percentage of the population that doesn't have access to high speed internet." Viewers in rural locations watching via their cell phone faced excess provider data charges in addition to the All Access subscription fee, added several others.

Of course, as the case of UPN shows, broadcast models did not guarantee accessibility. Moreover, CBS occasionally disavowed the franchise's broadcast pedigree when deploying it to support the premium All Access model. CBS Interactive's Jim Lanzone, for example, argued that broadcast television has not often nurtured the more niche science fiction genre: while broadcast television supported a few cult hits, he stated, "historically, a show like 'Star Trek' wouldn't necessarily be a broadcast show, at this point" (Johnson 2016). Lanzone added that while CBS could have matched *Discovery* to the more niche CW network or Showtime premium cable service (both CBS-owned), the franchise "just fit" better with the digital space of All Access. Some commentators scoffed at this, recuperating the broadcast legacy that perennially sustained the franchise—"the place it has been for hundreds of years" (Trendacosta 2016). Yet the question of what is truly the best "fit" for the franchise seems less important than the way in which CBS' use of *Trek* to move into new industry territory made the franchise a site of struggle over the comparative virtues of broadcasting and streaming, free and paid television—all centered on considerations of maintaining access.

CONCLUSION

Television franchising has long supported attempts to launch new channels. As this process continues into the future, the case of CBS All Access may provide further insight into the franchise strategies of competitors seeking to build their own over-the-top subscription television services in turn. After announcing in 2017 plans to launch its own proprietary streaming service, for example, Disney claimed it would soon withhold online distribution rights for film franchises like *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe from former close partner Netflix (Lopez 2017). As potential flagships for the premium over-the-top service envisioned, these franchises had been targeted for exclusivization. Within these ongoing industry efforts, however, access to new channel spaces has sometimes become a source of consternation for those trying to follow familiar content across different channel boundaries. The movement across channel spaces that franchising can encourage requires consumers and industries alike to negotiate significant geographic, technological, economic, and cultural barriers to access along the way. In the case of CBS All Access, where a legacy television provider adapted its networking models to online subscription economies, reliance on franchises like *Star Trek* provided broadcast continuity amid the transformation to over-the-top streaming—while also situating those efforts in a longer historical tradition of managing industry changes via content appeals.

The central, ongoing challenge for CBS All Access lies in building a distinct, differentiable, and desired service that offers sufficient value for viewers to actively choose to subscribe. Franchising offers one logic whereby that value might be constructed and communicated. As Les Moonves stated in 2015, “There’s about a billion channels out there and because of *Star Trek*, people will know what All Access is about” (Goldberg 2015). Franchise programs like *The Good Fight* and *Big Brother* play similar roles here, too—establishing what makes CBS different as a delivery service by providing more of the content to which CBS has exclusive control. The exclusivization of that content behind a paywall, however, foregrounds the considerations of access built into the name and premise of the service. CBS hopes viewers will make new efforts to access legacy products as it moves them into a streaming environment; viewers, for their part, must consider the value such access offers, as well as the barriers in the way of maintaining access. Whether in relation to *Star Trek*, or other library product, all seem to be asking: how much is access to this franchise worth?

NOTE

1 Sehlats are fictional Vulcan fauna. Quatloos are an alien currency from the *Star Trek* episode “The Gamesters of Triskelion.”

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