

From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

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Spike TV

The Impossibility of Television for Men

Amanda D. Lotz

What does it tell us about men, masculinity, and television in the new millennium that a dominant media conglomerate—arguably one with the most successful record of targeting particular demographic segments with precisely branded content—launched a channel for men in the early years of the twenty-first century, but the targeted “men” didn’t show up? Or even more curious and indicative of tension in gender norms, social scripts, and the status of television in culture, what does it tell us that this channel, advertised explicitly as the “first network for men,” succeeded in markedly growing its female audience? This was the case of Viacom’s rebranding of its vaguely defined existing channel, TNN, as Spike in 2003.

This case study of Viacom’s efforts to transform The Nashville Network into The National Network and then into Spike reveals several challenges related to rebranding, specificity in brand creation, and targeted branding “for men.” Despite promoting a more focused brand identity, Spike—like many cable channels—filled much of its schedule with programming acquired after it aired on and was designed for a more generally targeted broadcaster. Sometimes this was because of costly and long-term acquisition deals made before a rebranding; sometimes it was just a function of available programming. The challenge of this acquired programming was that it could dilute and even contradict the brand identity the channel sought. Spike also encountered specific problems related to branding itself as a network for men—because men are not monolithic and women are a significant component of the television audience.

Spike “officially” launched in August 2003 after a few months of anticipation following Viacom’s announcement that it would rebrand its TNN channel that January. The origin of TNN can be traced back to a March 1983 debut as The Nashville Network, a channel then owned by Opryland USA that began by offering six hours of new country music-focused programming nightly that it then repeated twice more daily (“Buyouts Shuffle” 1986). The channel gradually expanded into what was described as a country

“lifestyle channel” throughout the late 1980s, meaning it provided “country” versions of traditional genres such as game shows, sports, and news, but often with a particular focus on service programming (typically programs that provide a lesson of some sort, such as cooking or talk). In an effort to dominate the country niche, The Nashville Network’s owner (Opryland/Gaylord) bought a controlling stake and subsequently took over emerging competitor CMT (Country Music Television) in January 1991 and programmed the two networks to complement each other throughout the 1990s. Westinghouse Electric (owner of CBS at the time) purchased The Nashville Network and CMT from Opryland/Gaylord in February 1997, shortly before renaming itself as the CBS Corporation. The Nashville Network was already well established as a cable service by this point and had the eighth most expansive distribution, with over 70 million subscribers (“Gaylord Sells” 1997).

The Nashville Network began changing in late 1999 shortly after the announcement of the intended sale of CBS to Viacom. The channel moved away from its country roots, first dropping the extended name of The Nashville Network to be simply TNN (Rice 2000). Viacom then renamed it The National Network in September 2000. At this point, much of TNN’s remaining country programming shifted to CMT so that The National Network could become more of a general entertainment destination. The channel featured the recent Viacom acquisition of WWF wrestling—which had long been the highest-rated weekly basic cable series when airing on general entertainment competitor USA—and the channel sought “to create a balanced programming schedule that will appeal to adults 18 to 49” (Dempsey 2000). In late 2001, The National Network developed a branding strategy featuring the tagline “We Got Pop” to advance its perception as a general entertainment channel, and it added *Baywatch*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *MadTV* to its lineup.

Although its country roots were not central to Spike’s branding, this industrial history is important. Spike was not a new channel, but emerged from the rebranding of one of the earliest established cable channels, making it broadly available on the most basic tier of most cable services, often with a fairly low channel number.¹ Placing a new channel on cable systems nationwide was difficult in some periods of cable history and such channels were often numbered far from the most watched channels.

In January 2003, Viacom announced Albie Hecht as the new president of TNN and that TNN would become “television’s first entertainment network for men” (Dempsey 2003). Hecht pronounced that TNN planned “to do for men what Lifetime has done for women.” In reality though, the new name and rebranding campaign simply promoted a gradual evolution that had been developing since the Viacom purchase and the introduction of wrestling.

In between the January announcement of Spike as an “entertainment network for men” and its late summer debut, it evolved—at least it seems in Hecht’s mind—into more of a *lifestyle* network for men. Hecht reportedly dumped a pile of men’s magazines such as *Maxim* and *FHM* on the desk of his boss, Herb Scannell, in the planning of Spike and proclaimed, “We’re going to own this” (Swanson 2003). Significantly, magazines such as these are primarily lifestyle in nature, and while *Maxim* was surging in popularity at the time, the economics of magazines are quite different than cable

channels. The lifestyle versus entertainment focus is also significant from an economic perspective because lifestyle fare, with its emphasis on talk and easy incorporation of product placement, tends to be a much cheaper source of content than creating new scripted series or even purchasing previously aired series.

In identifying these magazines as models, Hecht effectively narrowed the target of Spike as a channel for a specific set of men who conformed to the “new lad” masculinity. The construct of the “new lad” emerged in the British magazine market in the mid to late 1990s as titles such as *Loaded*, *Maxim*, and *FHM* surprised the industry by proving the men’s style subgenre was far more profitable than expected. As Imelda Whelehan explains, the new lad was “self-centred, male-identified, leering and obsessed by sport” (2000, 5). But the new lad wasn’t simply a reversion to a pre-second-wave masculinity; he was more complicated, often featuring fundamentally sexist perspectives, but “under the shield of irony,” which was used to deflect feminist criticism (Whelehan 2000, 5).

But despite these aims, it was difficult to identify Spike as a network for men, let alone new lads. Spike’s history is full of complicated negotiations and contradictions that indicate a fair amount of slippage between what the channel claimed to be and what it actually was. Sound bites from the channel’s top executives—such as Hecht’s desire to be the television version of *Maxim*—suggested a clear sense of what they thought “men” wanted and how Spike should reach them, but for viewers, there seemed little correlation between these branding statements and the channel’s actual programming. Regardless of the advisability of designing a channel targeting new lads, the difficulty of finding or affording programming consistent with this brand make it difficult to assert Spike was ever really a network for men.

An average day just after its launch in September 2003 featured syndicated episodes of familiar programs *Baywatch*, *Miami Vice*, *The A-Team*, *Real TV Renewal*, *Seven Days*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Highlander*, and *Blind Date*. None of this programming was original to Spike and was created to compete in a competitive environment of male and female viewers. At most, Spike aggregated a collection of shows that skewed to male audiences on a single channel. Even in terms of original programming—which is often what channels use to cement their brand identity—Spike initially featured programs purchased before Viacom relaunched as a channel for men. The initial program lineup for Spike consequently was not all that different than it might have been if the channel had stayed branded as TNN.

The most successful new original content during its first year was the reality series *The Joe Schmo Show*, which twisted the then still emerging reality genre by featuring one “contestant” who thought he was part of an unscripted reality competition show while the rest of the cast was populated by actors following a loose script. While clever and innovative, *Joe Schmo* was not particularly consistent with “the first network for men” brand. It wouldn’t have been out of place on any generally branded channel, except for constructing misogynistic versions of standard reality show contests, such as “Hands on a High-Priced Hooker,” in which the last contestant with a hand on a female stripper earned “immunity” from that episode’s voting.² Otherwise, Spike was best known during its first year for its wrestling program *WWE: Raw*, which it had aired since 2000 and the channel’s days as TNN. In the cases of both *The Joe Schmo Show* and *WWE:*

Raw, the programming that brought most viewers to Spike was not particularly related to its newfound identity as a network for men.

Spike's incumbent programming from its TNN days—mostly series created for broadcast networks—was “successful” in drawing audiences; however, many of these shows contributed little to the rebranding because they weren't particularly identifiable as television for men. The dilemma of having its most successful programming reach an audience not in sync with its brand identity emerged clearly a year after Spike's launch when it began airing daily episodes of the CBS crime drama *CSI*. TNN purchased the series at a pricey \$1.6 million per episode in April 2002, well before the rebranding announcement in January 2003, as such sales are typically made two to three years before the programming will begin airing.³ Spike began airing back-to-back episodes between 7:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. Monday through Friday in September 2004, and the program ranked first among all basic cable channels in both adults and males ages 18 to 49 on its first night (Reynolds 2004).

Spike did achieve audience growth and expanded awareness in its first year with the new brand; it increased its prime-time audience by 61% by October 2004 from a year earlier. The problem was what programming and which audience groups accounted for that growth (Vasquez 2004). Year-to-year, Spike achieved a 3% gain in males ages 18–34 and 21% among men ages 18–49. However, the network also achieved a 63% increase in women ages 18–34 and 81% gain among women ages 18–49. Consequently, the channel went from men composing 68% of its audience at launch in August 2003 to 58% by the end of 2004 (Hempel 2005). Low previous viewership among women may have been part of the spectacular jump, but the growth among 18- to 49-year-old women was now enough to rank Spike sixth in prime-time *women's* viewership overall (Vasquez 2004). Unsurprisingly, women weren't tuning in for “television for men” but for *CSI*.

Adding to Spike's challenges was that it tried to build a channel on a particularly narrow subgroup of the male population and one that was widely perceived to be fleeing television at the time. Industry journalist Kevin Downey summed up the situation of Spike as a “bold experiment” for “relaunching as a cable network targeting the very young men who then appeared to be leaving network TV” (2005). According to Downey and the media buyers interviewed for his story on Spike's early stumbles, Spike failed because targeting this narrow demographic of young men required more substantial programming budgets than the channel had available and because—and related—it failed to develop a program that was distinctively emblematic of Spike TV. John Spiropoulos, associate research director of MindShare, explained that

Strategically, it makes sense to target men within the cable realm. However, tactically it's a nightmare. Cable networks that have been successful attracting men have done so with small programming blocks, like Cartoon Network's Adult Swim and Discovery's Monster Mondays.

Spiropoulos acknowledges the complexity and variation of the male audience relative to the economics of cable programming and advertising. The subgroup of men who support Adult Swim—a block of mature cartoons airing from 11:00 p.m. through

5:00 a.m.—was not a big enough demographic to support an entire channel—much like the case of the new lads Spike sought. However, it also didn't work to combine various blocks of programming targeting different types of men or so-called men's interests into a men's channel, because any particular man still had the unrewarding experience of coming to the channel and, more often than not, finding something that appeals to a different type of man or—in the case of much of Spike—programming that remained from TNN and didn't particularly target men at all.

While the “new lad” focus was a strategic miscalculation, many of Spike's other struggles were familiar to many cable channels. Most channels did not have budgets that could afford the scale of original production that would create programming that matched the brand. Content available for acquisition—the bulk of cable schedules—was designed for the broader target of the original licensors.

Spike consequently quietly pivoted its brand focus from new lads to action programming. Spike lost the contract for its most popular programming World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in September 2005 and replaced it with mixed-martial arts competitions (MMA) through a contract with Ultimate Fight Championship (UFC) (Martin 2005). The deal included *The Ultimate Fighter*—a reality competition featuring 16 athletes who compete to win a contract to fight UFC pros, including a UFC event during its finale (Lafayette 2005). Described by one journalist as a “roid-ragin' version of *America's Next Top Model*,” *The Ultimate Fighter* series introduced MMA to a more mainstream audience, and the Spike/UFC relationship proved valuable for both entities—bringing Spike its biggest audiences and providing an initial foray for UFC into non-pay television (Press 2006).

After the UFC announcement in early 2005, there was little change at Spike until early 2006 as the channel left most existing programming in place and did not establish much new programming. The core of the schedule remained heavily reliant on old episodes of *CSI*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. *The Ultimate Fighter* was the marquee original offering on the channel, which otherwise continued low-budget unscripted fare (both original and acquired) grouped in blocks, such as the “PowerBlock” weekend lineup of shows about vehicles (*Xtreme 4x4*, *Trucks!*, *Car and Driver*, *Horsepower TV*) and “real” video (*Real TV*, *World's Most Amazing Video*, *Disorderly Conduct*).

By March 2006, an evolution into Spike 2.0 had transpired. The cursive logo that critics had long noted as incongruent with its intended brand was replaced with tough block letters in chrome. The “first network for men” tagline had disappeared shortly after Spike's launch, but now the network clarified what viewers could expect from the network with a tagline call of “Get More Action.” Despite allowances for construing this as a double entendre resonant with the new lad of Spike 1.0, in terms of programming, the network's interpretation seemed decidedly literal. The channel's focus evolved from aiming to be a men's lifestyle channel into a men's action entertainment channel; a “men's” channel at least to the degree that action programming skews toward male audiences and features male protagonists. Spike President Doug Herzog explained, “The network is about testosterone, action and unpretentiousness. And we're unapologetic about all of it. Spike is a place where a guy can be a guy and not feel bad about

it” (Martin 2006). But in a strategic shift, such gendered claims were no longer part of promotion. Although a preference for action programming may correlate with gender and certain constructions of masculinity, branding the channel as the place for viewers seeking a particular genre made the channel’s identity clearer and eliminated the sense that accomplishments such as increasing women viewers should be considered a failure of branding.

As a site for action, Spike attempted different programming strategies related to this genre and tried to developing original programming rather than relying on acquired series. Most of this programming was themed around sports, adrenaline, or service topics. In terms of sports, Spike stayed clear of the mainstream sports that were the domain of broadcast networks and ESPN, instead continuing to build its lucrative relationship with UFC and adding the non-WWE wrestling program *TNA Impact*. The series *Deadliest Warrior* also debuted strongly for the channel in 2009 and reinforced its action identity with episodes that pit “history’s greatest warriors”—such as Gladiator vs. Apache—against each other using contemporary science, experts, and CGI technology. By 2009, Spike’s action guy had developed morbid interests—seen most clearly in



FIGURE 16.1 *Transition from the first cursive logo of Spike 1.0 and the new, more generic “action” identity of Spike 2.0.*

the program *1000 Ways to Die* (which reenacted horrific yet unusual deaths, in ways the series' tone suggested were comical), while *Jesse James Is a Deadman* similarly capitalized on adrenaline in its offering of daredevil feats.

Even in the Spike 2.0 era, the center of the channel's scripted programming continued to be airings of *CSI*, which was eventually joined by *CSI: New York*. Spike 2.0 significantly diminished the diversity of its acquired series; in 2008, the channel began a five-year run of *Married . . . With Children* (a series that had completed production over a decade earlier) and *Unsolved Mysteries* (curiously, most recently found on Lifetime, which had been "Television for Women"), and Spike drew attention by purchasing television rights to the *Star Wars* and *Rambo* franchises. Each of these programming acquisitions made some sense on its own: *Unsolved Mysteries* paired well with *CSI*; *Married . . . With Children* offered more of the crass and irreverent aspects of Spike 1.0; and *Star Wars* and *Rambo* broadened beyond the Bond films that were Spike's primary theatrical fare. Nevertheless, only *Rambo* fit the action brand well.

The scheduling strategy Spike developed also helped contain the incongruence of its acquired series. By summer 2009, the channel sometimes aired as many as *nine episodes a day* of the *CSI* series, although seven episodes following a two-hour morning block of *Married . . . With Children* was fairly common Monday through Friday. Although not promoted this way, this effectively made the channel the *CSI* network by weekday, while retaining its identity as Spike at night and during the weekend.⁴ Spike strategically emphasized its most brand-relevant programming in the hours it was most likely to reach its audience. Its *CSI*-packed daytime did little to advance its action guy brand, but it proved lucrative by pulling in a broad audience during the hours in which its target audience was less likely to view. Despite Spike's brand struggles, NBCUniversal decided to launch a channel targeted to men as the Esquire Channel in 2013. Drawing on *Esquire's* magazine brand, it was designed as a men's lifestyle channel aimed at the "modern man," thus far removed from the versions of a men's network that Spike offered.

Spike also emphasized its identity through its Spike.com site during the era before YouTube, Hulu, and Netflix came to dominate Internet-distributed video. The site featured a combination of professional video and amateur postings and came closer to illustrating the breadth of material a "men's network" would require (Mahmud 2008). The site expanded beyond the genre parameters of Spike 2.0's action guy and created a space augmented with an array of "men's" interests. Because users just go to the parts of a website that interest them—instead of the way a channel programs particular content at particular times—Spike.com could simultaneously address a heterogeneity of men. Once YouTube and multi-channel networks began dominating online video aggregation, Spike.com morphed into a more conventional website built around the channel's schedule and content.

Despite its struggles in establishing itself as men's network, Spike was a very successful channel throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century. In April 2008, it was the fourth most-watched cable network among 18- to 49-year-olds (Crupi 2008). The channel's viewer composition was "most male" during *The Ultimate Fighter*, when its gender skew was 75% male (Grayman 2008). That a quarter of its audience was still

female suggests the value of a brand that does not exclude audience members with like tastes through demographically specific branding. Its responses of adjusting to a genre-based brand, segmenting its program schedule, and using its web platform to address a range of men's interests significantly assuaged Spike's earlier challenges.

The situation of Spike can also be read in comparison to the situation of the multiple channels for women that developed in the early 2000s. During this time, Lifetime, Oxygen, and WE each built a program identity around a distinctive femininity while proclaiming itself a destination for women (Lotz 2006). Spike's 2.0 action guy isn't all that different from what could be called Lifetime's "melodrama mama" in the sense that the channels targeted a subpopulation of a demographic with a particular aesthetic taste. In the gender-segmented sector, this appeal through genre proved more successful than demo/psychographic appeals—such as Spike's early efforts to reach new lads or the "thinking woman's" fare programmed by Oxygen at its launch.

Spike's story illustrates the distinctive competitive conditions of the first decade of the twenty-first-century US television industry. Before the late 1990s, cable programming was mostly a backwater of series acquired from broadcast networks and old movies, and by 2010 Internet-distributed television radically readjusted industrial norms and introduced yet additional competing program services that utilized the different affordances of Internet distribution. Spike 1.0 might have been more viable if it had emerged as an Internet-distributed service. Without a linear schedule to fill, Internet portals can develop content for more precise tastes—for example, for a monthly fee of \$9.99, the WWE Network offers wrestling and programs targeted at audiences interested in wrestling. It doesn't have to buy content to "fill out its schedule," and subscriber funding encourages precise rather than broad content appeal. Spike was certainly not alone in being better suited for the affordances of Internet-distributed television. Just as cable had recalibrated broadcast's mass appeal, by 2016 Internet-distributed services introduced yet new strategies and business models that likewise shifted the programming possibilities of television.

In January 2017, NBCUniversal gave up its attempt at television for men and announced it would shut down the Esquire Network. Less than a month later, Viacom announced the end of Spike, which would be rebranded as the Paramount Network—drawing on the film brand also owned by the Viacom conglomerate. News of Spike's rebranding arrived just a week after NBCUniversal made official the rebranding of female-targeted Oxygen as a crime-focused channel.

In a matter of weeks, three of five gender-branded cable channels left the cable ecosystem. Spike was the most successful of the shuttered channels in terms of number of viewers. All channels—and their few owners—were challenged by the shifting competitive dynamics of television introduced by the arrival of internet-distributed television that allowed on demand access to programs, often supported by subscriber fee rather than advertising. Substantive adjustments in the television marketplace only expanded as content creators shifted to innovating for this new distribution technology. Notably, with the exception of the Lifetime Movie Club—arguably about genre as much as gender—no gender-branded portal had launched by the end of 2017.

NOTES

- 1 While channel number may seem unimportant today, this was long a very important feature. When audiences faced fewer channels and could reasonably scan through them all, a low number was considered valuable.
- 2 The game was a variation on the “Hands on a Hardbody” competition common at the time that required contestants to maintain one hand on a vehicle that the last remaining competitor won.
- 3 Notably, this deal, which involved a series half owned by Viacom-owned CBS, was completed in early 2002 and predated any public announcement of the rebranding of TNN.
- 4 Spike’s prime-time block also typically offered original programming until 1:00 a.m. to capitalize on the heavier viewing of its target demographic in the late-night fringe hours.

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