

Audience Generations: Millennials, "Becomers," and Beyond

"On Becoming FreeForm"

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On January 12th, 2016 the cable network [ABC Family officially changed its name to Freeform](#). This rebranding finally rid ABC Family of the word "family" with which it had been contractually saddled because of its Christian Broadcasting Network roots. The rebranding indicated a transformation in not only assumed content but in assumed audience. Where the ABC Family previous rebrand in 2006 had introduced the term "millennials," with much hullabaloo, now with the shift to Freeform the network shed the term millennial, replacing it with what seemed to many the overladen term "Becomers."

As millennials age into parents, ABC Family now Freeform needed to disassociate itself from its aging audience. Freeform presents "Becomers," as a "life stage" rather than a specific generation. [According to various press materials, Becomers span life experience from "first kiss to first kid," age range 14-34](#). Just as the millennial category did for ABC family in 2007, Becomers offer an expansive category seeking to unite teens and young adults, this time linking them by their shared processes of "finding themselves" rather than by a shared generational ethos. Because this newly defined target audience now represents a life stage rather than a specific generation, this means that as a category they (supposedly) won't have an expiration date.

This rebranding has not exactly been celebrated by media critics and network audience members. One commentator described ABC Family's rebranding as the result adolescent rebellion and identity crises a la the characters in the TV series the network features:

You know that time in your life when you're still not quite certain who you are?,,,Maybe you decide the moniker you were given at birth doesn't quite fit you. Suddenly, "Lauren" is so lame.,,,It's so not you. From now on, everyone should call you Hexagon. Yeah, that's right. Hex. What's that time called again? Oh right, being a teenager. ...That's basically what's happening to the television network currently known as ABC Family.

<http://www.refinery29.com/2015/10/95299/abc-family-freeform-becomers>

[ABC Family/Freeform embraced this association of its network shift with a growing up, inviting its viewers to "Become with us. ABC Family is becoming Freeform."](#)

Other viewers and commentators reject the act of audience definition performed by the network, as in the following comment:

[Hey Millennials, this is our lucky week! ABC Family just coined a new, even more annoying word to define the next generation so some of the heat will finally be off of our lazy, entitled butts.](#)

This comment is notable because it at once uses the term “Millennial” in a functional way (addressing a constructed/imagined cohort of readers for the blog 20-nothings) and also, in calling out ABC Family’s coining of terms to “define” its audience, mocks and rejects the commercial cooptation and wrangling of audiences into categories, generational or otherwise.

So what can we learn from this interplay between network definitions of their audience and audience responding to definitions of themselves? ABC Family/Freeform has striven to create visions of audiences that will serve their brand identity in a given moment, hence the shift from millennial to becomer. And yet do doubt these shifting definitions have also sought to incorporate/coopt developments in audience culture. This is especially clear in the FreeForm/Becomer brand remake. Where ABC Family’s remake into a home for millennials was driven by consultant’s generational definitions, the FreeForm adaptation seems shaped by modes of already-existing audience participation with television, modified into a brand appropriate frame.

Yes, audience members and critics still reject the (re)naming and (re)branding; responses to the “ABC Family Free Form Sizzle Reel” included “RIP ABC FAMILY 2001 – 2016,” “pointless and dumb,” and “what kind of bullshit!” But even in so doing, these viewers inscribe themselves into the network and generational renaming process. It’s not necessary for viewers to feel themselves correctly hailed; even when they feel misrecognized, when they respond, they participate in a conversation with the network about what constitutes youth and youth identity in any given moment. They may feel mislabeled in the network’s industry speak, but even that sense of mislabeling—if they articulate it rather than just drifting away from the network, that is—is a form of engagement with network discourse, and in the end may solidify the concept of the brand and the audience-category. [As Caroline Framke puts it, “...Before you mock, be forewarned that "Becomer" is exactly the kind of moniker that could be mercilessly derided before it's all of a sudden become part of the public consciousness, with no signs of letting go. That is, after all, the history of 'millennial' and even 'teen.'”](#)