

Considering the Convergent Award Show

“Is the Show Eligible for an Emmy Award? Media Convergence and Evolving Definitions of Television”

Elissa H. Nelson, *Purchase College, State University of New York*

In 2008, the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences changed eligibility requirements for the Emmy Awards in order to allow streaming programs to be considered for nominations. The rule changes were met with little fanfare at the time, but in 2013 they garnered more attention. Netflix, as HBO had done about 15 years earlier, was bursting onto the award show stages with its original content. The Emmy Awards continue to evolve and to adapt their strategies to accommodate the programs viewers are choosing to watch and the new “channels” upon which they’re shown – in 2016, they announced new categories for short-form streaming content. These moves lend credence and give prestige to the content, while also laying parameters and providing definitions to the question of “What is television?” in the convergent media landscape. Importantly, the prompt for this question addresses not just issues of social media interaction during an awards show like the Emmys, but illustrates the need for awards to accommodate viewer desire and demands on multiple fronts. Part of the groundwork is laid for increasing viewer engagement by offering more inclusivity in the very types of programs eligible for nominations. That award shows are meeting audience interest while categorizing streaming programs as television is itself an instance of convergence that speaks to the evolution of television and new media.

A brief history of the changes in Emmy eligibility requirements provides evidence of the Academy’s prescience. The first Emmy broadcast was in 1949, and there hadn’t been many changes in the networks eligible for nominations (ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS) until 1986 when Fox joined the broadcast lineup. The first significant rule change came after just two years. Cable had become more popular throughout the decade, and in 1988, programs on pay networks could earn nominations. Yet, it wasn’t until more than ten years later in 1999 that HBO’s *The Sopranos* earned a Best Drama nod, and it was the first cable drama to win in 2004. Since then, cable has increased its award show presence. Subsequently, just as the initial change was met with little notice when it first went into effect because no programs were initially nominated, it was actually in 2008 that Internet streaming programs became eligible for awards, but not until a few years later that the modification attracted attention. Although it took cable over a decade to earn a nomination, the rise of streaming was much more rapid; it took Netflix about half that time when *House of Cards* earned recognition the first year of its release in 2013. While new changes for short-form content were announced in 2016, one of the big differences is that the award ceremonies for these programs are separate from the nationally televised Emmy broadcast. Arguably, this also speaks to the notion of popularity in addition to categorization. The Primetime Emmy Award show, bound by ratings, is trying to boost viewership. A way to do so is to increase the number and types of programs eligible in order to align with audience tastes. Whether short-form content can bring in the numbers remains to be seen.

While the Emmy broadcasts are bound by ratings, Internet streaming services are famously, if not, notoriously, not constrained by the same restrictions. Ted Sarandos, the chief content officer

of Netflix, has said repeatedly that ratings are irrelevant. Subscription services operate under a different model than advertising-based networks; they can focus on targeted programming that appeals to various audience segments, while getting award show nominations is also important because of the associated prestige and media coverage. The hope is that both strategies will lead to higher subscription rates. As a result, services like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu benefit in multiple ways from the new television distribution landscape. There is a branding enterprise at work in terms of original content, but also in terms of their vast library catalogs – multiple popular, niche, and award-winning shows from various networks are available on Internet streaming sites.

Ted Sarandos is also famous for stating that “television is television, no matter what pipe brings it to the screen.” The idea is that the method of distribution is less important than particular attributes of the work. This impetus is echoed in comments made by the Academy’s chairman, Bruce Rosenblum, when he declares that “television is on broadcast, on cable and on demand over the Internet,” and when he states how vital it is to ensure the rule changes evolve in order to keep up with current production trends and audience predilections. Accordingly, convergence can be seen not just between different types of media, but also in data-driven and consumer-driven approaches, the intertwining of technology and content, the increasingly similar definitions of services and channels, and of the working relationship between “Hollywood” and “Silicon Valley.” Strategies of attracting and retaining audiences, for studios, channels/networks/services, and award show broadcasters, include coming up with quality and niche programming, paying attention to both prestige and publicity, and keeping up with central tenets of digital distribution, that of giving consumers, who are swimming in a sea of choices, what they want in terms of content, convenience, and cost.

Television is at the vanguard of change – quick production and release schedules mean that it can tackle current subject matter that captures the tenor of the time and turn it around quickly. However, the present intervention about the convergent award show isn’t solely about content per se; it’s also about the means of distribution, of recognizing the importance of both quality and popular content, regardless of from where it originates, as long as it maintains an understood (and theoretically agreed upon) television format. The types of programs eligible for Emmy Awards therefore speak to the idea of media convergence, and indicate that the updating of these rules both contributes to, and offers foresight about, evolving definitions of “television.”