The Past, Present, and Future of Television Commercials

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This position paper argues that in order to better comprehend television's present state of affairs, and possibly, to anticipate its trajectory, we may want to revisit and reinterpret the medium' past. For one of the intriguing developments of today's "post-network" era is the likely reemergence of single-sponsorship, a business model that dominated US commercial broadcasting between 1930 and 1960. In this time buying pattern, one marketeer customarily paid the distribution fees and production costs of an entire series for a full, 39-week season. For its large financial contribution, a single-sponsor could claim exclusive association with and exclusive advertising rights to said program. Equally important, because single-sponsored shows were typically developed and produced either by the single-sponsors' advertising agency or an independent packager contracted by the agency, the model also accorded the single-sponsor editorial control over the entire broadcast. Concurrently, the stars of the program were almost always employed as spokespersons by the sponsor–sometimes the trade magazines of the industry referred to these "celebrities" as "secondary trademarks" for the sponsoring product or service.

Unfortunately, network-centered consensus history has never discussed the arguably most important ramification of this arrangement: single-sponsored radio or television programs were capable of delivering not only advertising, but various other marketing communication messages. In other words, marketeers could conduct a multitude of promotional activities such as publicity, sales promotion, and product integration in/through their programs *in addition* to advertising. Quite often, a single-sponsored program became the pivot of its sponsor's entire marketing communication effort as it provided a relatively simple, but effective way to harmonize and coordinate the disparate communication functions used by the firm's marketing department. Structuring the various promotional elements around a series and the series' stars also helped the campaign to develop a unified voice: not only the message but also the messengers were kept consistent across all communication platforms. (I suggest visualizing marketing communication's different functional areas as the spokes of a bicycle wheel, and the single-sponsored broadcast series as the wheel's hub, from which all the spokes fan out.)

The extent of the sponsors' determined effort to integrate their promotional activities through their broadcast programs–and ultimately, to increase their effectiveness–is epitomized by the largely untold story of Philip Morris' systematic exploitation of one the most popular and influential series in television history, *I Love Lucy*. In essence, *Lucy* was developed in 1951 as the primary communication vehicle for the cigarette company's flagship Philip Morris Brand (PMB) and remained as such during the four seasons the brand underwrote the sitcom. Between 1951 and 1955, *Lucy* and its two headliners, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, were prominently featured in almost every marketing communication activity for PMB. (To illustrate the central role of the series and the stars in the promotion of the cigarette brand, I will, if possible, show a short slide presentation reviewing one particular six-month campaign, "The Snap-Open Pack," from 1954.)

<Series of slides accompanied by brief comments>

Why does all this matter in 2018? I believe that a thorough reassessment of single-sponsorship would help broadening our understanding of the programming goals, strategies, and impacts of the era, complicating some of our assumptions about radio's and television's past. If history is a useful tool for making sense of our present, we must constantly revise our historic narratives–however entrenched they are–when new ideas, engendered by new evidence, emerge. Furthermore, looking at single-sponsored programs as marketing communication vehicles also draws attention to the inherent dangers of letting sponsors become dominant program producers again. As the analysis of *Lucy* vividly demonstrates, when marketeers have editorial control, without appropriate regulatory checks, programs are designed to deliver a wide variety of marketing communication messages, and often abused as integration tool for the promotional campaigns of their underwriters. In the final analysis, marketeer-produced content leads to further overcommercialization of television, a development with far-reaching, detrimental consequences for our society.