Considering Television’s Past and Present

By Karen Petruska

6-8 minutes

The Flow Conference of Television and New Media, held at the University of Texas at Austin on September 10-12, hosted “core conversations” with media industry executives as part of a larger effort to innovate the conference format. Among the topics discussed over the three-day event were the history of television and the ways new technologies are transforming the industry. For the scholars in the room, these conversations produced insights into how the industry self-theorizes its achievements and challenges, the sort of access that provides material for more critical reflections in the subsequent panel discussions and reflections.

The first core conversation, moderated by former Peabody Award director Horace Newcomb, focused on the history of television and featured former *Los Angeles Times* critic Howard Rosenberg, director Michael Zinberg, and writer David Milch. Newcomb described the session as “the old man’s panel,” and some audience members commented on Twitter and in a subsequent analysis of the conversation that it was also a panel populated exclusively with white men. Of course, historically white men have dominated the executive ranks of media industries, and these trends persist today (in film, in television, and in film criticism, though the world of TV criticism is seeing more parity in terms of gender, if not race). The panel's optics, therefore, speak to broader problems but nevertheless pose a notable challenge to future organizers should they keep this format as part of the conference.

Speakers:

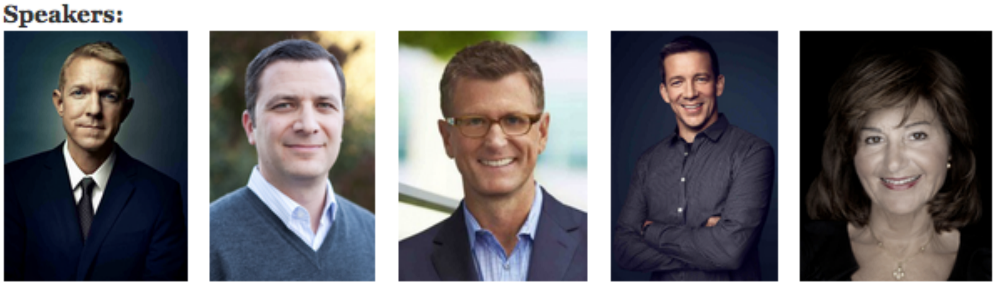
David Milch, Howard Rosenberg, and Michael Zinberg

The panel largely celebrated television's achievements, from the boldness of Norman Lear's Tandem programs in the 1970s to *Modern Family*'s "normalizing" portrait of gay marriage today. Zinberg distinguished television as America's primary storytelling mechanism, and cited a writer's strike in 1973 and the FCC's Financial Interest and Syndication policy as crucial facilitators of the rise of the television writer, today represented most prominently by showrunners like Shonda Rhimes, David Milch, Dan Harmon, and Kurt Sutter.

Among the session's most powerful moments was Milch's description of watching horrifying news events like the ISIS beheadings and Jack Ruby's assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald. Noting that moments like that are "too close, too real, too awful," he explained, "The fundamental motive of [fictional] TV is to create a narrative where you can co-exist emotionally." Even though audiences have often proven to be less offended than network executives might expect, fear has historically driven programming choices; nevertheless, all the panelists felt that today executives might be treating their creative teams with more faith than fear (at least in terms of mature themes, if not necessarily in terms of an unencumbered artistic freedom). Zinberg surmised that narrative television has sometimes benefitted from the horrific images that appear on live news—allowing scripted television to examine the profound and persistent racial, religious, and gendered struggles viewers experience in their everyday lives.

Another core conversation, moderated by scholar Tom Schatz, featured a television writer (Rob Thomas), an advertising executive (Judy Trabulsi), and three studio chiefs (Kevin Beggs, Jordan Levin, and Kevin Reilly) talking about digital disruption. One thing they all agreed upon: the Millennial audience rules but perplexes the industry. Young people simply aren't following the same viewing patterns as previous generations. Trabulsi said her advertising company "knows everything" about her client's target audience, but she still struggles to predict Millennial tastes.

Speakers:



Kevin Beggs, Jordan Levin, Kevin Reilly, Rob Thomas, and Judy Trabulsi

Another force in the industry that the panelists discussed with some ambivalence was Netflix, for its popularity is believed to pose the most significant threat to traditional business practices. Reilly pointed out that Netflix strips out network branding when it streams programs, which means the service's subscribers may not even know, for example, that *Mad Men* is an AMC show. AMC, therefore, finances, markets, and builds the show's audience, and then Netflix reaps the benefits, according to Levin. Echoing concern, Trabulsi suggested that if the trend Netflix started—airing content without ads—continues, "that's going to be a problem for advertisers and for traditional TV." [You'll find some productive counterpoints in our interviews in *Distribution Revolution*. See especially our conversations with Ted Sarandos and Betsey Scolnik].

For a writer and showrunner like Rob Thomas, the explosion of channel options has made his job easier—there are more buyers for the shows he pitches—but there is also less money offered by those buyers. Beggs agreed that dealmaking may be easy, but contracts are not; to wit, his company, Lionsgate, sold *Orange is the New Black* to Netflix during one meeting, but it took ten months to negotiate the licensing terms. As channels have proliferated, audiences have fragmented—something media scholars have noted for some time now. To put an emphasis on this point, Kevin Reilly joked that when he started working with cable channel FX, he had never seen a rating with a decimal point on the left side of the number.

There was a lot of "television everywhere" rhetoric, with panelists hawking consumer agency in an on-demand culture.

Yet, when asked why so much content is NOT available online, the executives agreed companies are not yet able to meet the increased consumer demand (issues of licensing terms, bandwidth, and labor were mentioned). To fully explain would take a complicated one-hour discussion, admitted Reilly, and all agreed the current system is based on an “insane matrix.” One voice missing from this conversation, as noted by Amanda Lotz, was that of the MVPDs, the cable/broadband delivery companies eager to implement their own, subscriber-only, TV everywhere systems. Still, the predominant feeling conveyed by the executives was one of optimism. Today, there is more content, more buyers and distributors of that content, more opportunities for advertisers, and a persistent demand from consumers for the content the industry provides.