

'NO NETWORK!': *Star Trek* and the American Television Industry's Changing Modes of Organization

by

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This presentation is based on a chapter from our book (in progress) for University of California Press, called *Small Screen, Big Universe: Star Trek as Television*.

This chapter - entitled 'Make it So' - deals with *Star Trek* as commodity. It is based on material collected by Máire Messenger Davies and Roberta E. Pearson.

The presentation at the MiT3 conference was given by Máire Messenger Davies.

Summary of presentation

- Background to project - the relationship between commerce and craft
- *Star Trek's* history & the history of TV
 - Industry conditions at birth of TOS
 - Aesthetics of commercial episodic television
 - Syndication as creative salvation - *Star Trek: The Next Generation*
- Cultural value: Issues of quality and creativity

The project arose from a course taught by Máire Davies for a number of years, on 'Television, Culture and Society.' Three years ago, we decided to teach this course together, and to use *Star Trek* as a case study. From this course, the book outline was developed and 'pitched' to UCP.

In the presentation, I (Máire Davies) deal with a theme recurrent throughout the book - the ways in which the text as an economic commodity inter-relates with production and aesthetic values and requirements. This approach draws particularly on our interviews with 28 Paramount production personnel, conducted in January 2002, in Hollywood. These interviews were facilitated by Patrick Stewart, who plays Jean-Luc Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG), whom we interviewed initially when he was filming *A Christmas Carol* for Hallmark, in Britain in 2000, and then later in Hollywood in 2002.

The presentation briefly relates some of the ways in which ST's history co-relates with historical developments in the TV industry; it looks at some of the aesthetic requirements of commercial episodic television; and refers to the way in which syndication kept TOS alive, and then proved the economic, and cultural, salvation of the franchise as a whole with TNG.

Again, a persistent theme raised by ST's historical development within the TV industry is cultural value and quality, linked to questions (problematic when discussing television) of creativity and authorship.

No network!

- 'TNG was a totally different experience . . .the big difference was, and this is heaven for a film producer, there was NO NETWORK, FOLKS, NO NETWORK! There was no broadcast standards department, there were no censors . . . We did not have to submit one of our stories to the network for approval and that same script to broadcast standards for approval by the broadcast censors. Nothing. Nada.'

--Robert Justman, co-executive producer, *Star Trek* TOS & TNG, interviewed by MMD and REP, Los Angeles, 10th Jan 2002.

The quotation, from which we drew our title for this presentation, comes from our interview with Robert (Bob) Justman, a co-executive producer with the creator of *Star Trek*, Gene Roddenberry, on The Original Series, and in the first season of *The Next Generation*.

Justman was adamant that not being accountable to a network was incredibly liberating to production staff. This was the major change brought about by TNG going straight into syndication.

Backstory: *Star Trek* as television

- *Star Trek* as television spans much of TV history:
- TOS (The Original Series): 1966-1969 & in syndication ever since
- TNG 1987 - 1994, (most recent film *Nemesis*, 2002)
- *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, 1993 - 1999
- *Star Trek Voyager*, 1995 - 2001 - all still in syndication
- *Enterprise* is now in 3rd season, 2003

Star Trek was a useful case study for teaching about television because its nearly 40 year history spans much of the history of US television and has been affected in a number of ways by developments in the television industry.

This slide gives the major dates for each of the TV series. (We deal with the films elsewhere in the book, so these are not given here.)

Industry conditions for TOS

- 1950s: Hollywood studios couldn't beat television so joined it - went into episodic series production e.g. *Wagon Train* (1957-65)
- Growth of mass audience: 1953-55, from 40-80% of households owning TV set
- Overall ratings were primary measure of success
- Networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) were dominant
- Introduction of color
- TV writers had to pitch to studios, who then dealt with networks: in 1963 Gene Roddenberry offered TOS to Desilu, thence to NBC (after two pilots)

When ST began, the demand for weekly episodic series was high, because of the above conditions, particularly the Hollywood studios moving into TV production in order to compete economically with television; there was also the rapid growth of the 'mass' audience, requiring (so it was assumed) more down-market forms of television than the earlier, prestigious single dramas of the 1950s.

Mass ratings were the determinant of success with audiences, rather than success in reaching specific targeted demographic groups - a problem for TOS in the 1960s, with dedicated fans, but no mass audience.

The 3 networks controlled virtually all aspects of production and distribution.

Color TV was being introduced, although the majority of households still had black and white sets. Gene Roddenberry insisted to NBC that the show should be in color because of the special effects, makeup and costumes. This proved to be wise from the point of view of the show's future in perpetual syndication.

To get a show on the air, a number of hurdles had to be cleared: the concept first had to be pitched to a production studio, who would then try to sell it to one of the big three networks.

Roddenberry, then a freelance writer working on *The Lieutenant* for MGM, was sent by his agent to Desilu (founded by Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz) who agreed to produce a *Star Trek* pilot. This pilot, 'The Cage', starring Jeffrey Hunter as the Captain, was not taken up by NBC, but the network did take the unprecedented step of commissioning another pilot. The second pilot, 'Where no Man has Gone Before', with extensive cast changes, including William Shatner as the new captain, James T. Kirk, was accepted and TOS - and a money-spinning legend - was launched.

Requirements of episodic television: 'The pitch'

- One hour (45 minute) episodes with 4 commercial breaks
- Industrialized production for 24-26 weeks
- 'extensive use of a basic and amortized standing set'
- 'similar world concept' - 'wide use of existing studio sets, back lots and local locations'
- Technical ingenuity - 'the energy matter scrambler' (no need for take-offs/landings) & 'M Class planets' - oxygen and humanoids

Roddenberry's pitch, we suggest, is worth studying as a good example of how to turn the commercial constraints of industrialized episodic television to creative advantage. In the first place, he likened his concept to an extremely popular existing television concept - the episodic Western series, so he described Trek as 'Wagon Train to the Stars.' (In fact, it was more closely based on the C.S. Forrester Hornblower novels.)

Within the requirement for economy necessary with the three-week production turnarounds in episodic television, Roddenberry's pitch successfully anticipated potential budgetary objections.

For instance, he pointed out that the show could be shot on a basic standing set, and that the crew would only land on 'M class planets' that supported humanoid life; they could thus look like locations on the back lot or in Southern California.

The need for economy also gave rise to imaginative and economical 'inventions' such as the communicator (mobile phone) and 'energy-matter scrambler' (the transporter).

These inventions, many of them prophetic, have been part of the longstanding appeal of the show, and later, profitable components of its merchandising spinoffs.

Death & rebirth of *Star Trek*: Fans and syndication

- 1967-8 Fan campaign to save TOS (scheduled by NBC at 10 pm on Friday evenings)
- 1969: TOS cancelled because of low ratings
- 1967: First syndication deal with Kaiser
- 1973: Failed animation series
- 1979: *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*
- 1987: *Star Trek: The Next Generation* - sold into first-run syndication

The Original Series did not do particularly well in the ratings and in its second season (1967-8) was in danger of being cancelled. It was saved by something that was to prove of enormous value to the whole franchise - the enthusiasm of fans, many of them educated and aspirational young people.

A fan campaign (partly engineered by Roddenberry), led by fans John and Bjo Trimble (who themselves have contributed to the commodification of the show by writing their own book about it) saved the show for a third season. But it was scheduled late on a Friday night, when its core audience of young people was likely to be out, and so it lost ratings and was cancelled after 79 episodes.

It had already found a syndication deal, and it began its 'second' life as a syndicated show, where its reputation and popularity continued to grow. This was associated with a growing proliferation of 'merchandise' - initially informal and non-commercial, with fans exchanging their own homemade models, costumes, stories and newsletters (see Westfahl, 1996). Eventually, merchandising of objects associated with the show became the sole prerogative of Paramount Studios (owners of the property, after they bought Desilu in 1967; in 1994 they merged with Viacom Inc and are now a multi-media conglomerate). This has been a continuing source of conflict with fans, raising constant questions of 'ownership' of the text. (We deal with fans in more depth in our chapter on Audiences.) The *Star Trek* films kept the franchise alive in the 1970s and 1980s - and its television version was eventually revived in 1987 with TNG.

Star Trek TNG: The first run syndication deal

- 'The original *Star Trek* became a hit and a phenomenon when it was sold into syndication. . . And it was the popularity of that show in off-network syndication that spawned *The Next Generation*.' Kerry McCluggage, Head of Paramount Pictures Television, interview with MMD and REP, Hollywood, January 16th 2002

Our interview with McCluggage confirmed the historical accounts: it also emphasizes the fact that the revival of the franchise, and its immense profitability since, owes its success to syndication - the ability of TOS to maintain an audience throughout successive (and continuing) repeats. Successful syndicated shows need to have an appeal that does not vanish after one viewing (a problem, we suggest, with the contemporary fashion for 'reality shows.')

Encouraged by the success of TOS in syndication, the studio felt they could relaunch the TV series in a new form and with a new cast - controversially, since fans felt that only Kirk, Spock and their colleagues could ever truly be "Trek" - and fans, as we have seen, were powerful voices.

The terms of the TNG deal

- New show not to be offered to networks
- Show to be offered to individual local stations - including network affiliates - FREE
- Stations would allow Paramount 7 out of 12 minutes advertising time; they could sell the other 5 minutes locally themselves
- TOS already making \$1 million per episode in repeats - SO - Stations could no longer buy the profitable TOS, unless they took TNG too.

The TNG deal is an example, we think, of creativity in business operations.

Because of the problems mentioned by Robert Justman, and the success of TOS in syndication, it was decided to avoid the networks in marketing TNG.

The new show was offered to individual local stations for nothing, in exchange for advertising time.

The clincher was that the stations couldn't have TOS (highly profitable for them) unless they took the new series too.

Production implications of syndication deal

- 'No network!' - no broadcast standards censorship
- More quality control, e.g. over transmission quality (Bob Justman's concerns on light)
- Possible constraint on 'seriality' - episodes might be shown out of order in syndication
- In fact - narrative experimentation took place with end-of-season cliff hangers (TNG 'Best of Both Worlds', seasons 3/4) and continuing story arcs (DS9 war with the Dominion)

This decision had a number of production implications - to continue our theme of analysing the relationship between commerce and craft:

We have mentioned Bob Justman's relief at not having broadcast standards querying scripts, casting and sexual and social aspects of the show. There were also technical advantages in terms of quality control.

Narrative experimentation took place - including end of season cliff hangers, as with the third/fourth season TNG episodes 'Best of Both Worlds' parts 1 and 2, and with continuing narrative arcs, as in DS9.

The 'seven season' norm for ST series was begun with TNG - which ended in 1994, despite high ratings, so that the TNG cast could take over the movie franchise. All subsequent ST series (*Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager* and *Enterprise*) have been designed as seven season products, a situation which has provided the employees on the show with exceptional job security in an industry that is renowned for insecurity. A number of them pointed out that this continuity also makes quality control easier. This is another aspect of the franchise's economic, social and cultural value.

Executive perspective

- We had tremendous creative freedom on *The Next Generation*, and everybody involved with it found that extremely liberating. It was really one of the pioneer shows in first run syndication... . And over time, it's become of even greater importance, because networks have a different agenda than suppliers of programming... . The importance of *Star Trek* to the studio is such that, we would not even allow the possibility of a network's creative input damaging our franchise. We're certainly free to make our own mistakes, and we've made some, but we didn't want to fail on somebody else's terms with this franchise.
 - Interview with Kerry McCluggage, MMD & REP, January 16th 2002

We found that in the kinds of discourse used by our interviewees, 'creativity' and 'creative freedom' were terms used at least as freely and emphatically by executives and line-producers (responsible for budget-management) as were commercial aspects - 'ratings', 'profit' and so on. Craft-workers, writers and actors obviously use terms like 'creativity' to characterize the value of what they do - but executives, marketers and audience researchers, also used this kind of language.

The above quote is an example. McCluggage suggests that creative freedom is a major factor in the profitability and value of the show to Paramount.

Factors in success: 'Gene's vision' - the TV auteur

'Gene Roddenberry's genius, wasn't really that he constructed a fun science fiction universe. It was that he and his colleagues on the original *Star Trek* consciously sat down and said we're going to do a television show about the vastness of the cosmos and all the strange things that one finds there. And for a low budget television show, even a high budget television show, that's intrinsically impossible... . Roddenberry said OK, we're going to tell the majority of that story from one control room... . And then most of the time when you go to planets, it's going to be on earth-like planets and with earth-like aliens. And if you accept those conventions, you set out to do something that was entirely impractical and made it very practical. And that was genius.'

Interview with Michael Okuda, MMD & RP, January 14th 2002

I want to end by allowing some of the professionals we interviewed to speak for themselves - in particular to illustrate our theme of how commodity requirements and creative requirements are seen to overlap by the workers in the show.

For example, Michael Okuda, himself 'an auteur' of a kind, in that his graphic displays for all the series from TNG onwards are known as 'Okudagrams', characterized Gene Roddenberry's ability to make the impractical practical, as 'genius.'

The concept of originary 'genius' was a theme repeated by our other interviewees. It raises the nature of creativity and authorship in television, which we address in other chapters of the book in more detail.

There is no doubt that the Roddenberry 'brand' is seen as essential in the marketing and commodification of *Star Trek*, despite the fact that he himself wrote only a minority of the episodes of TOS, and had very little direct input to TNG. His own production company, Norway Productions, did have a stake in the profits of TOS. His name continues to be used in the current series, *Enterprise*.

'Inheriting the mantle': Rick Berman

'We're dealing with a fictional, future universe that needs a certain consistency to it, in terms of the quality of the film-making, the writing, the photography, the direction and the casting - the sets, the props, the costumes, which are all created out of whole cloth. - The sound of a view screen or the sound of a transport, or the sound of the ship pass-by, has to have some degree of continuity to it. I'm the person who works on every script, and I see every drawing for the sets. I supervise the final editing on all of the shows. I work with all our post-production on the visual effects, and the opticals. God is in the details, and the details are very important in *Star Trek*'.

—

Interview with Rick Berman, MMD & REP, Hollywood, Jan. 17th 2002

It seems from our interviews, and readings of texts associated with *Star Trek* - insider accounts, such as that written by Herb Solow and Robert Justman in 1996, *Inside Star Trek: The Real Story* - that production workers acknowledge a need for one person to have a shaping vision, and editorial control, even though many other production decisions are taken by many other people.

Gene Roddenberry's original concept for *Star Trek* - widely referred to as 'Gene's vision' by our interviewees - continues to inform and determine the ways in which stories and production values are created within the franchise, and the ways in which they are described and marketed.

Rick Berman became the co-executive producer of TNG with Roddenberry, and then took over when Roddenberry died in 1991. He has been 'Mr. Star Trek', as he put it, ever since, and the above quote illustrates his all-encompassing quality control of the product. He is seen as 'inheriting the mantle' of Roddenberry and as the second 'Great Bird of the Galaxy' - an idea from which he likes to distance himself, while at the same time insisting that 'God is in the detail.' We are intrigued by the concept of the producer as 'God' - c.f. *The Truman Show!* Elsewhere in the book, we discuss in more detail the discourses used by production workers to describe their own work and their relationship with their colleagues.

Organising the writers: Michael Piller

'My fundamental responsibility . . . was to ensure that every story in every script was as good as it could possibly be, every week. I worked with a staff of five or six writers at a time on TNG...and we hired people and took pitches from independent writers and read material from freelancers and even amateurs, I just needed ideas, I needed to be bombarded with ideas for shows, which I would then buy and work with the writers to develop. Gene had these rules for a purpose and I used to call it 'Roddenberry's box' and I liked the restrictions of the box. A lot of writers didn't but I did. It forced us to be more creative and forced us to find new ways of telling stories...and as time went on I became, among the writers at least, the defender of the box, so it ultimately turned into Piller's box . . . I take a great deal of pride over helping to direct the show in a way that Gene Roddenberry really cared for.'

Interview with Michael Piller, MMD & REP, Hollywood, 10th January 2002

Michael Piller, a co-executive producer on TNG, DS9 and *Voyager*, and head writer for these series, (now no longer with the show but running his own company, Piller Squared) can also be characterized as an 'auteur' - in a more directly literary sense, as well as being a producer.

The way Piller worked emphasized the importance of the writing team, and of utilizing story ideas from as many sources as possible - this was unconventional. He even accepted unsolicited script ideas - something that Paramount generally disapproves of (see their website.)

Piller, too, attributed the success of the show - insofar as it is successful - to the ability to work within 'the Roddenberry box'. 'Gene's vision' continues to be a major determining concept for the nature of the franchise.

Roddenberry had strict rules about the Utopian behavior of his Federation employees of the 24th century - including the view that human beings no longer fought with each other (although they might fight with other species). This imposed dramaturgic problems on the writers - which Piller insisted they should acknowledge and work within. He gave us a number of examples of how this disciplinary constraint worked, which are discussed in more detail in other chapters of the book. Piller was the writer of 'The Best of Both Worlds' 1 and 2, generally credited with helping TNG to mass popularity - the second part got a rating of 12.3 and the fourth and fifth seasons (in the early 90s) of TNG regularly achieved ratings of 13, 14, 15.

The crafts people: 'Playful alchemy'

'the wonderful sense of playful alchemy that we would have. Like, oh, we need, a solar explosion. OK, well, if we take baking soda and throw it out of this thing and shoot it and have it hit on a bowling ball, and then we'll turn it around and squeeze the ball, then we can make it look like ejected solar ray is hitting the force field on the Enterprise. If we put the liquid nitrogen run over this, or splatter something, because you had to make it up as you went along, and you needed a sense of seeing whatever materials were around, seeing the potential in those things, apart from their original intent. For example, I can't go to a hardware store and go to the plumbing supply without seeing a space ship part.'

Interview with Dan Curry, MMD & REP, Hollywood, Jan 14th 2002

Some of our most entertaining and informative interviewees were the craft workers and design staff on the show.

Dan Curry, Visual Effects Producer of *Star Trek: Enterprise*, is just one of a number of examples - his notion of 'playful alchemy' seems to us an extremely fruitful definition of what makes 'the details' (to use Berman's phrase) work.

Curry's design approach of playing with everyday objects has given rise to some of the most iconic visual aspects of *Star Trek*, for instance the current transportation effects, and the Klingon weapon, the B'atleth.

Curry commented on the way in which computer-generated design (CGI) has changed the notion of 'playful alchemy' away from physical modeling - a development he partly regrets.

With Curry, as with other crafts people we interviewed, we became very aware of the interdependence of the workforce in *Star Trek*. For instance, a topic that we believe is under-discussed in academic television studies is the role of organized labor. An effects-intensive, long-running show like any of the *Star Trek* series could not survive without effective trade union activity, (set builders and so forth) and good labor relations - another source of value to the show both as commodity and as culture.

The 'unknown Shakespearean actor'

Memo to Gene R.: 'I am even more enthusiastic about the highly skilled British actor, Patrick Stewart, who recently arrived in Los Angeles. I have seen him read Shakespeare and Noel Coward, his abilities are of the highest order, he is totally believable as either warm friend or icy villain. His repertoire experience and classical background, coupled with his personal magnetism, would make him a valuable leading member of the Enterprise crew.' - 'He was the captain. I saw him in mufti and he blew me away when he started speaking. There was no doubt in my mind.'

Interview with Robert (Bob Justman) MMD & REP, LA, Jan. 11th 2002

I conclude the presentation by returning to the theme of cultural value - with a clip from an interview with Patrick Stewart, carried out for the 25th anniversary documentary about *Star Trek*, produced by Paramount. In the clip, Stewart likens the role of the captain of the Enterprise to some of the Shakespearean authority figures he has played, such as kings and generals.

Stewart was an adventurous piece of casting - and turned out to be a major source of value, both cultural and economic: TNG was both the most popular and the most critically well-received of all the *Star Trek* TV series, and Stewart's contribution to this was generally acknowledged by our interviewees, as well as by other sources.

Our discussion of *Star Trek* as commodity attempts to account for the contribution of a variety of sources of value - auteurship, 'playful alchemy', cultural respectability (as with the Shakespearean actor Captain) and performance, all of which contribute both to the economic and the cultural worth of the product. We also note the inter-dependence of these qualities and the ways in which television workers characterize what they do as a collective, 'team', 'family' enterprise.

Creativity in television cannot be attributable to a single Romantic creative auteur, but it is undeniably present. The importance of a single shaping vision in creating and continuing a successful TV show is frequently emphasized by these interviews, alongside the continuing stress on collectivity and inter-dependence - themes which turn up repeatedly in *Star Trek* stories, of course.

Back to the network?

- 1995: UPN (United Paramount Network) formed linking client stations into a new form of network, based on studio production and its output
- 1995: *Voyager* launched as UPN's flagship program covering 80% of USA (not ideal since programs cannot be trailed on main networks)
- 2003: UPN losing ratings and threatened with loss of affiliates

FOOTNOTE ON THE CURRENT TV TREK

Enterprise, the most recent TV series, which is a prequel to The Original Series, and stars Scott Bakula as Captain Jonathan Archer of the first starship *Enterprise*, is not as successful with audiences or critics as was TNG, nor even *Voyager* - for reasons which we discuss elsewhere in our book, in a chapter addressing 'the quality of *Star Trek*.'

At the time of our interviews, *Enterprise* was in its first season and was doing well in the ratings, but they have declined since then.

Rick Berman, in our interview with him, expressed concern at the fact that UPN did not cover the whole of the country, but pointed out that there was no way that the studio's own channel would not carry its own flagship programming, so *Enterprise* must continue on UPN.

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See below for further reading on the history of *Star Trek*, and of TV, including 'insider' accounts.

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