

GOSSIP GIRL AND THE CW: DEFINING A NEW NETWORK

**(YOU'RE NOBODY
UNTIL YOU'RE TALKED ABOUT)**

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how the teenage soap *Gossip Girl* was crucial to the gendered strategy by which The CW (2006-2012) defined itself in the post-network era. The CW relied on narrowcasting, branding, and transmedia to attract and keep a very specific share of the audience in order to create a viable fifth network. Analyzing The CW's early years through *Gossip Girl* casts light on the evolutions that shaped US television industry's during this period, from the renewed interest in female audiences to economic and technological convergence.

In 2014, CW president Mark Pedowitz proudly declared that The CW was no longer “the *Gossip Girl* network” (Holloway 2014). This statement points to the successful re-branding of the network, which it pursued by diversifying its program schedule. Pedowitz’s claim also suggests that The CW, created in 2006, now finally appealed to male viewers after targeting young women for several years. This paper argues that this initial branding strategy was based on the success of *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012), which allowed the network to survive during its first years, while experimenting with ways to engage viewers in an era characterized by convergence and the rise of digital media.

The CW was launched in 2006, emerging from the fusion of UPN and The WB. The network’s original head was Dawn Ostroff, who came from UPN. *Gossip Girl* first aired in September 2007 – it was created by Stephanie Savage and Josh Schwartz, who adapted the program from a successful book series. The series is named for the anonymous blogger within the fiction, who chronicles the lives of its protagonists: privileged teenagers living on New York City’s Upper East Side. *Gossip Girl*’s final season aired in 2012 while Mark Pedowitz replaced Ostroff in the spring of 2011. Pedowitz endeavored to reassure the network affiliates and the parent companies, and set out to transform the network into a viable enterprise (Littleton 2016). This paper focuses on the period between Ostroff’s nomination in 2006 and the final season of *Gossip Girl* in 2012 to analyze the gendered strategy adopted by the CW to find its place in the post-network era.

With an approach anchored in media studies, this case study relies on primary sources concerning the role of *Gossip Girl* in the market strategy of The CW during its early years. These sources include official and promotional statements by network executives; analyses and reports by trade publications; and the evidence of the network’s programming strategies, together with the textual content of the programs themselves. The study aims to show that the teenage soap *Gossip Girl* was key to the definition and the very survival of the network. In doing so, it builds upon Valerie Wee’s analysis of The WB’s construction as a “teen brand” (Wee 2010: 142–65). The CW’s strategies further illustrate the US industry’s evolution in the post-network era in terms of branding, convergence, and transmedia storytelling. The CW differs from its predecessor, however, in the way it targeted the even narrower demographic of women aged 18 to 34.

By examining how The CW evolved during the *Gossip Girl* years (2007-2012), we can see the network’s changing relationship to its female audience. Moreover, *Gossip Girl* was

part of a franchise, so its analysis demonstrates how media convergence influenced the network’s marketing and narrative strategies during the “digital turn”. Ultimately, thinking about *Gossip Girl* in these terms helps to throw light on The CW’s more recent market strategy.

1. THE CW: A NEW BRAND FOR A NEW GENERATION

The CW is the product of a series of evolutions that have transformed the TV industry since the mid-1990s. In a larger context of deregulation, the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules were abolished in 1993. After two decades, broadcasters could again have financial stakes in the programs they aired, which allowed Paramount Network and Warner Bros. Entertainment to launch UPN and The WB in 1995. Hoping to reproduce the success of the Fox network (created in 1986), the newcomers adopted narrowcasting strategies and addressed the 12-34 demographic. The similarity between the two networks is evidenced by the fact that UPN acquired *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Roswell* in 2001 after The WB cancelled them. Valerie Wee’s case study of the WB shows how the network competed with the big four by targeting a younger demographic (Wee 2010: 145). This proved a viable strategy for launching a new network in the post-broadcast era, allowing a new brand to be established, and affording experiments with multi-media synergy (Wee 2010: 153). In the long run, however, UPN and the WB did not manage to attract enough viewers and advertisers to become profitable (Learmonth 2006).

In 2006, when Warner was supposed to renegotiate its contract with its affiliates, CBS and Time Warner seized the opportunity to – in the words of Bruce Rosenblum, president of Warner Bros. TV group – “build a true fifth network and make it competitive with the Big Four” (Learmonth 2006). So in September 2006, the newly formed network, a joint venture between CBS Corporation and Warner Bros. Entertainment, a division of Time Warner, made its debut and aired the most popular programs from UPN and The WB. From the very beginning, the aims were clear: to create a profitable network and to reap benefits from new programs (Carter 2006b). As Wee points out, the CW faced the same challenges that the WB had experienced ten years before (Wee 2010: 162).

The creation of The CW coincides with what Amanda Lotz calls the “multichannel transition” and the beginning of the

“post-network era” (Lotz 2007). The abolition of the Fin-Syn rules and the multichannel transition led to increased competition and declining audience shares. Because of this situation, networks adopted strategies such as counter-programming and narrowcasting that used to be specific to cable networks. From Fox to The CW, newcomers in the TV industry thus targeted a smaller portion of the audience than the Big Three, to find their place in a redefined television industry. This is what UPN and The WB tried to do as well, but the target group was too small to be shared, hence the decision to merge the two networks. As Amanda Lotz explains, “the competition arising during the transition to a post-network era has made it more profitable for programmers to cater to niche audience tastes, which was less advisable when networks sought universal appeal” (Lotz 2006: 26).

Any network constructing a niche audience still needs to consider the economic model that continues to define advertiser-supported TV. That is, the niche audience must be large enough and/or include enough “quality” consumers to be of value to advertisers. Dawn Ostroff, the new president of entertainment at The CW, insisted that her network should at first court a particular audience profile: the CW was to target viewers aged 18 to 34. This group was valuable for the network because of its size – 72 million potential viewers under 25, according to Ostroff (Carter 2006b) – and because of its economic power: in 2005 American teenagers spent \$159 billion (Prah 2006). Coming from UPN, Ostroff sought to implement a similar strategy to “brand the network as a popular site for older teens and young adults” (Wee 2010: 162).

To attract these viewers and the advertisers who wanted to reach them, The CW first aired the most successful shows from UPN and The WB: *Gilmore Girls*¹ (The WB 2000-2006; The CW 2006-2007), *Smallville*² (The WB 2001-2006; The CW 2006-2011), *Veronica Mars*³ (UPN, 2004-2006; The CW, 2006-2007) and *Everybody Hates Chris*⁴ (UPN, 2005-2006; The CW, 2006-2009). From the beginning, The CW programmed a very limited number of daytime hours compared to the other broadcast networks. Apart from the wrestling show *WWE Smack Down* that aired until 2008, the network’s

primetime schedule relied on scripted series, and a couple of reality shows, most of them short-lived and starring flight attendants (*Fly Girls*), fashionistas (*Stylista*), or ballet dancers (*Breaking Pointe*). The only really successful reality programs on the network were *America’s Next Top Model* (2006-2015) and *Beauty and the Geek* (2006-2008). Both of these fit seamlessly with the scripted programming, which focused on teenage protagonists, and suggested the construction of a young and diverse audience.

Initially, The CW’s programming suggested that social and cultural diversity of the 18-34 demographic was key to the network’s strategy. As CBS executive director Leslie Moonves declared in 2006: “The CW is going to be a real competitor – a destination for young audiences and diverse audiences and a real favorite among advertisers” (Learmonth 2006). This is why, originally, programs centered on white teenagers coming from The WB were balanced by the more ethnically and socially diverse casts of UPN shows.

Even though it also targeted a younger audience, the CW’s branding strategy differed from that of the WB. In opposition to the WB’s “conservative, idealistic, teen identity” (Wee 2010: 147), the network presented itself as a site of opposition to parental authority. In 2008, the Parent Television Council, a parental advocacy group, protested the representation of sexuality on *Gossip Girl* and described it as “mind-blowingly inappropriate” (Parents Television Council 2007). The network embraced the controversy and launched a provocative advertising campaign to signal the series’ return after the writers’ strike. The campaign featured the text message “OMFG” superimposed on images of the characters kissing. Both Ostroff and then-marketing director Rick Haskins consider this a pivotal moment for the network’s image:

Ostroff: As controversial as it may have been, the campaign set the tone for the network and the brand.

Haskins: That’s when *Gossip Girl* went from 60 to 120 miles per hour. We planted a very strong flag in the marketplace, and to this day we’re known as the “OMFG network.” (Bruce and Rose 2012)

This strategy allowed the network to gain publicity, and so it was pursued during the following season. To advertise the second season of *Gossip Girl*, the network used scandalized reviews as headlines over images of the characters in intimate situations (Ivie 2017). Adopting a more irreverent position than UPN and The WB was a way for the new net-

1 *Gilmore Girls* focused on the relationship between Lorelai Gilmore and Rory, the daughter she had when she was sixteen and raised on her own far from her wealthy parents.

2 *Smallville* told the story of Clark Kent before he became Superman.

3 Created by Rob Thomas, *Veronica Mars* starred Kristen Bell as a student who worked as a private investigator.

4 *Everybody Hates Chris* was a sitcom focusing on the life of Chris, an African-American teenager, whose adventures were based on the life of comedian Chris Rock.

work to define its own identity. The less cautious approach was probably made possible by the evolution of community standards regarding indecency. Despite the vocal opposition of groups like the Parents Television Council, The CW took a calculated risk at a time when the decline of broadcasting networks and the rise of premium cable helped to make violence, sex and obscene language on screen more acceptable to the general public. By courting charges of indecency, and by aligning its content with the kind of boundary-pushing displayed by premium-cable networks like HBO and FX, The CW constructed its core audience as more mature than the teens targeted by its predecessors.

Targeting young adults was not only meant to attract advertisers in a competitive market, it was also a way for CBS Corporation and Time Warner to reach a potential audience for their own productions. For instance, the network was supposed to air commercials for movies produced by Warner Bros.' film division (Carter 2006a). However, The CW failed to establish itself as a distinctive brand during its first year, "as the shows were largely linked to the now defunct WB and UPN" (Wee 2010: 162). While Wee argues that The CW's main strategy was then to launch original shows and play on multi-media synergy to tap into the "target demographic's commitment to the internet" (Wee 2010: 162), I want to emphasize the gendered strategy adopted by the network when it faced its first challenges⁵.

2. REMEMBERING THE LADIES

During its first two years, The CW network did not attract as many viewers as Leslie Moonves (CBS) and Barry Meyer (Warner) had hoped. But with the second season of *Gossip Girl*, ratings started to improve: Monday nights attracted 41% more viewers in 2008 than in 2007 and, most significantly, the network went up 143% among women 18 to 34 (Carter 2008). This had consequences for the brand identity the network constructed in the years that followed.

5 Narrowcasting went hand in hand with changing representation of specific demographics: the value of viewers for networks and advertisers depends on their purchasing power. Since the 1990s, these logics have benefited audiences that used to be neglected by the Big Three: young people and women –and other minorities to a lesser extent. As early as 1949, when the short-lived fourth network, Dumont, was launched, it was the first to broadcast daytime programs to target housewives (Spigel 1992: 76). Counter-programming was generally seen as a way to compete against the leading networks. From the late 1960s until the 1990s, CBS aired female-centered shows to compete with ABC's Monday Night Football. Fox also adopted this strategy with *Ally McBeal*.

With its excessively rich, privileged, and mostly white characters, *Gossip Girl* did not really fit in the original plan to construct a network brand that would appeal to a young and diverse audience. Shortly after the first episodes aired, however, the series became the centerpiece of The CW's schedule, and the show's success played a major part in the definition of the network's identity until 2012. *Gossip Girl* seemed to confirm Ostroff's intuition that "Fame and opportunity are really important to young adults" (Atkinson 2006). Following the success of a soap that addressed all viewers as "Upper Eastsiders," the network ordered a number of shows that catered to a fascination with the insanely rich and successful⁶. The very titles of shows such as *Privileged* (2008-2009)⁷, *Easy Money* (2008-2009) and *The Beautiful Life* (2009) point to the new strategy adopted by The CW from the 2008 season. Under Ostroff, the network also kept trying to capitalize on *Gossip Girl*'s success by programming the 2010 reality show *High Society*, which followed a Manhattan socialite and her friends.

Targeting specific segments of the population implies that the network constructs its intended audience. Network executives, advertisers and marketers rely on gendered stereotypes to construct gendered audiences. Choosing to adapt a book series rife with scandal and romance and already popular with young women helped define the generic characteristics of "the CW show." *Gossip Girl* participated in the construction and the gendering of the CW's audience commodity during the first years of the network.

As shows from the parent networks were slowly removed from The CW's schedule, the newcomers were mostly variations on the soap opera, focusing on glamorous characters and their relationships. In 2008, *90210*⁸, *Privileged*⁹, *Valentine*¹⁰ and *Easy Money*¹¹ were scheduled; the following

6 It is probably no coincidence that this trend coincided with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

7 This show was adapted from a novel published by Alloy Entertainment, the book packaging company that also published the *Gossip Girl* series.

8 In 2008, the *Beverly Hills, 90210* franchise was revived with this drama that focused on the lives of wealthy students in Beverly Hills.

9 *Privileged* was based on a book published by Alloy Entertainment titled *How to Teach Filthy Rich Girls* (Zoey Dean, 2007) and focused on a Yale graduate who found herself tutoring two wealthy teenagers and enjoying the privileged lifestyle that goes with her new job.

10 This short-lived show followed the lives of Greek Gods who lived on earth and tried, with the help of a romance novel writer, to bring soulmates together.

11 In the eight episodes produced before it was cancelled, *Easy Money* told the story of the Buffkin family and their successful high-interest short-term loan business.

season, *Melrose Place*¹² and *The Vampire Diaries*¹³ confirmed Ostroff's plan: to brand The CW as "a destination for young women" (Carter 2008) by promoting shows set in a privileged environment and that generally focused on romance.

Catherine Johnson writes that, "as the television landscape has changed, the role of the channel brand has come under pressure" (Catherine Johnson 2012: 38). While more recent developments at the CW certainly support this conclusion, launching a new network in the mid-2000s still required the construction of a distinct channel identity, mostly in order to attract advertisers. In this case, it seems that *Gossip Girl*'s program brand was the basis for the construction of the CW brand.

The 18-34 female demographic is a very small niche. For such a narrowcasting strategy to be viable, the network needed to convince advertisers, affiliates and both parent companies that the viewers would be "advertiser friendly". In order to sell this "audience commodity" (Smythe 1981) to advertisers, the network constructed a channel brand identity that revolved around "consuming desires" (Naomi Johnson 2010)¹⁴. This is not to say that The CW tried to reach obscenely rich urban young women who bought designer clothes in order to seduce everyone around them. Rather, this strategy relied on the aspirational model typical of fashion magazines. The network promised advertisers access to viewers willing to consume stories glorifying success, luxury, wealth and beauty, and to spend time and money to acquire them. *Gossip Girl* focused on teenagers whose main concern was the way their lives would look on the titular character's blog. The series' narrative – especially its depiction of social media – thus reinforced a model of sociability based on reputation, mirroring the lifestyle and aspirations of the network's target audience.

The ways in which The CW constructed its audience of young women during its first years finally point to the impact of the digital era on the definition of channel brands. Catherine Johnson explains that, "the communicative ethos of broadcasting is shaped by the relationship between broadcasters, listeners/viewers and other stakeholders" (Catherine Johnson 2012: 119). As The CW was launched, the challenge

was not simply to sell programs to viewers, but also to sell the attention of viewers to advertisers. The advent of digital media and the dissemination of programs on a variety of platforms have tended to weaken the importance of channel brands for audiences, but the definition of a channel brand remained crucial for a young network that wanted to compete with the Big Four. While narrowcasting was not an innovation, the decision to brand the CW as a destination for women 18-34 was partly the consequence of *Gossip Girl*'s success.

3. CONVERGENCE AND TRANSMEDIA: GOSSIP GIRL AS A SUCCESSFUL FEMININE BRAND

The CW targeted younger viewers, who, as Ostroff put it, "are early adopters. They're going to be the first ones trying out new things" (Grego 2010). Thus the network especially had to anticipate and work with the new modes of television consumption being adopted by young audiences in the post-network era.

Early on, The CW faced a conundrum: *Gossip Girl* was clearly popular with many more people than the Nielsen ratings suggested. Moonves complained: "It seemed like I was hearing from more people personally who were fans of *Gossip Girl* than seemed to be watching it, according to the ratings we were getting" (Carter 2008). This created tensions between Ostroff and Nielsen as the network's head argued that the ratings were no longer capturing new modes of media consumption. Ostroff explained:

Nielsen doesn't have a great grasp on measuring younger viewers. You couldn't go anywhere in the country without finding people obsessed with the show. Where *Gossip Girl* ranked No.100 on the Nielsen list, it was No.13 when you looked at the power-content ratings—a combination of Nielsen ratings, traffic online and buzz. (Bruce and Rose 2012)

Gossip Girl therefore also signaled a break in the economic relationships between networks, audiences, and advertisers, and brought into question the relevance of the A.C. Nielsen Company, the ratings monopolist. The decision to order a full season after airing the first episodes was not based on Nielsen ratings, which were very low, but on DVR numbers and the show's success on iTunes – three weeks after the first

12 This show was the sequel to the 1992 Fox soap opera of the same name.

13 Based on a book series of the same name, *The Vampire Diaries* lasted for eight seasons and focused on the relationship between Elena, a teenage girl, and two vampires.

14 In this article, Naomi Johnson studies the books by Alloy Entertainment, the company that created the *Gossip Girl* concept. She writes that these books "create specific links between specific brand names, romance, and sexuality." (Naomi Johnson 2010: 59)

episode aired, *Gossip Girl* was in the top 5 list of the platform's most downloaded episodes (Adalian 2007).

Gossip Girl illustrates how The CW struggled to find ways of improving the show's ratings, and adapt to the digital turn. At first, the network tried to force viewers back in front of their TV set by removing *Gossip Girl* from its streaming platform. This strategy failed as viewers turned to illegal downloading websites, and the bump in the ratings was limited. The episodes were soon back on the CW website for streaming, as the network did not want to lose those fans and viewers coming to the site (Grossman 2008).

Indeed, taking the digital turn was essential to the success of the new network. The CW was born two years after Facebook, one year before the first iPhone, at a time when — as the narrative of *Gossip Girl* itself shows — people's lives and their relation to audiovisual content were deeply transformed by digital media. Part of *Gossip Girl*'s appeal was the way its narrative included social media and new ways to consume stories. While the goods consumed by the characters often remained inaccessible to the viewers, their online practices were being adopted by the target audience. As Rick Haskins explained:

Online is one of the most important things for the demo [adults 18-34]. The timing of this network is so right; if this had happened a year ago, it would have been too soon because what was happening in the wireless and online space was just beginning to jell. It just seemed to happen at the right time to incorporate new media and old media together in a new brand. (Nurdyke 2006)

Digital development was always a goal for The CW. During the first upfront presentation for advertisers in 2006, Ostroff's speech clearly took into account emerging practices, as she announced that viewers would be "able to view CW shows and related content thorough the Web, cell phones and on Apple's iPod media player", and that "The CW's Web site [would] feature several interactive and social networking elements catering to the network's mostly younger audience" (La Monica 2006). As viewers were texting, Facebooking and later Tweeting about the show even as they were watching it in the same room, *Gossip Girl* threw light on new ways to consume media content.

Those new practices were taken into account to offer advertisers better access to the show's audience. As DVRs enabled viewers to skip through the traditional commercial

breaks, advertisers and broadcasters had to develop new ways to reach viewers. In addition to the ubiquitous product placement and long-term partnerships with brands such as Verizon (Steinberg 2007), the network also experimented with an original form of promotional content, echoing the historical relationship between soap advertisements and the soap opera as a genre (Steinberg 2009). In 2009, Dove co-produced a short program titled "Gossip Girl: real NYC stories Revealed." Jessica Szohr (who played Vanessa Abrams on the show), hosted these "Cwinger Ads", the first part of which aired during the show's commercial breaks while the end was available online. The Dove Cwinger Ads presented young women who resembled characters on the show (the African American filmmaker; the gorgeous socialite; the independent fashion designer) and thus used the *Gossip Girl* brand to sell a lifestyle — and deodorant. By encouraging viewers to switch from one platform to another, the CW perfected "cross-corporate promotional tie-ins", which The WB had experimented with in the late 1990s (Wee 2010: 154–55). These examples suggest that being the "*Gossip Girl* network" was not only about defining a genre — it was also about devising new strategies that embraced the influence of digital media.

In this context, the show also illustrates the cultural, technological and economic convergence that has characterized the media industry for the past decade. The origins and developments of the *Gossip Girl* brand demonstrate how the TV industry adopted transmedia strategies made possible by the development of digital media, supported by increased corporate consolidation and conglomeration, and fueled by the resulting desire to promote synergy (Le Fèvre-Berthelot 2015).

Gossip Girl is a good example of a transmedia franchise: first, because it depends on new practices associated with digital media and social networks (Derek Johnson 2013: 30); second, because it illustrates the relations that characterize media franchises where conglomerates have stakes in several outlets. In this case, Time Warner owned Alloy Entertainment and Warner Bros. Television (which coproduced the show) and The CW (which distributed it). Considering *Gossip Girl* as a media franchise includes not only top-down extensions created by the entertainment industry, but also bottom-up productions created by consumers, an essential dimension of convergence as defined by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins 2008: 18).

The increased consolidation that has characterized the media industry for the past few decades is clearly visible in the way Time Warner controlled the various entities involved in creating, producing, and distributing *Gossip Girl*. The franchise issues from what Amy Pattee calls a "conceptual

commodity” owned by the book packaging company Alloy Entertainment (Pattee 2006: 155). The concept was developed in 2000, when 17th Street Productions became Alloy Entertainment, after it was purchased by Alloy Media (Alloy, Inc.) – a direct marketing company that creates and develops content targeting women 12-34. Alloy was then bought in 2010 by Zelnick Media, a private equity firm that, in June 2012, sold Alloy Entertainment to Warner Bros. TV (a division of Time Warner). Apart from the intervention of Zelnick Media, all other mergers confirmed the links that already existed between the various entities: 17th Street had worked with Alloy to promote *Gossip Girl*, and “five Alloy properties [were] produced and distributed by Warner Bros. TV” at the time (Goldsmith 2012). The CW is central in this scheme because the network was created in part as an outlet for content produced by Time Warner.

The transmedia development of the *Gossip Girl* narrative is also striking. There are multiple extensions of the *Gossip Girl* franchise, linked by three major elements: the title, the themes, and the tone. The guiding thread is indeed *Gossip Girl* herself (the names and storylines associated with the characters may be different depending on the extensions). No matter the platform, the blogger’s posts are key to the narrative and the tone adopted is very specific.

The original elements of the franchise are the 14 books created by Alloy Entertainment, the first of which was published in 2002, and which proved popular (Nussbaum 2005). But the success of the franchise mostly relies on the teen soap that aired on The CW from September 2007 until December 2012. The TV series borrows its main characters and its narrative principle from the books. The franchise also encouraged viewers and fans to engage with the show’s universe and to play with its narrative principles across various digital platforms. As Louisa Stein points out, these digital extensions, from official games to fan blogs, questioned the viewers’ relationship to digital media (Stein 2013), thus reinforcing one of the show’s major themes. They also tapped into the interests of the younger demographic. Indeed, as Stein puts it, the franchise depicts “a digital culture shared by *Gossip Girl* characters and viewers, in which digital tools offer the powers and pleasures of access, networking, and intervention” (Stein 2013: 339).

Games such as *Gossip Girl on Second Life* (2007-2009) or the “Social Climbing” Facebook app (2011-2012) did not just reinforce viewers’ engagement with the show, they also turned viewers into consumers who could either buy clothes (whether for their avatars or themselves) or “spotted points” to belong to a virtual elite.

Countless fan websites and unofficial blogs also participate in the dissemination of the franchise across the web. The boundaries between fan and official content were blurred as the case of Karissa Bowers shows: Bowers wrote a blog called “Gossip Girl Fashion” that listed clothes worn by the characters and suggested similar items that could be bought to get the *Gossip Girl* look – in 2013, she was featured as a weekly columnist for the official *Gossip Girl* website.

The economic success of the franchise – and its presentation as a franchise rather than just a stand-alone teen soap – helped establish the legitimacy of the show and the network. As Derek Johnson writes, “franchising offered a significant narrative through which the presence of the feminine within patriarchal institutional structures and strategies could be imagined as intelligible and strategically rational” (Derek Johnson 2013: 62). The results validated the decision to target young women. When Ostroff left the network to join her family in New York, the network was “up 7% in total viewers, the biggest gain for any English-language broadcaster” (Andreeva 2010).

The CW experimented with the *Gossip Girl* franchise to help find a viable business model in the post-network era, illustrating how technological, economic and cultural convergence transformed the media industry and shaped the new network.

4. AND NOW, FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT?

In 2018 it seems that the fifth network has managed to re-brand itself and to acquire a cultural legitimacy that was out of reach for its teen soaps. From DC superheroes to *Jane the Virgin*, the generic category of the “CW show” has undergone major transformations. Mark Pedowitz was partly right: The CW no longer is the *Gossip Girl* network.

The first element that has changed is that rather than teen soaps, the network is now associated with shows based on DC comics superheroes (*Arrow*; *The Flash*; *Legends of Tomorrow*; *Supergirl*) and the glamour and rich teen trend seems to have faded. The second element of the network’s transformation is that “The CW is one of the most even of the broadcasters, with 51 percent of the viewership female and 49 percent male” (Madler 2016). Of course, this has to do with the major change in programming, itself the result of the network’s desire to break out of its niche. It is not unusual for networks to target the female demographic when they

are in a weaker position. Eileen Meehan explains that “the audience” has generally been defined as male (and mostly white). She writes: “networks that couldn’t draw the audience counterprogrammed for niche audiences, meaning women, or women and children, or African Americans, or Hispanic Americans, or some combination thereof” (Meehan 2002: 216). She also argues that “noneconomic assumptions undergird beliefs about what sorts of people ought to be the audience and that those assumptions follow familiar patterns of discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, social status, sexual orientation, and age” (Meehan 2002: 217). *Variety* – one of the major trade publications – has praised Pedowitz for broadening the audience in terms of gender, suggesting that for reasons which are not necessarily economic, male viewers are more valuable than female ones.

Yet, it must be noted that while the gender balance has changed, the changed schedule has introduced new female-led shows that challenge not only the generic category of “CW show”, but also the stereotyped representations of femininity that the network used to convey. From the diverse cast of *Jane the Virgin* (2014-) and its three generations of women, to the mentally ill singing and dancing Yale lawyer of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015- 2019), The CW is now praised for:

an array of women that are a little bit square, and who still get to be challenging, flawed, and surprising. [...] women [who] don’t have time for certain kinds of drama, yet [whose] adventures are so often crisply entertaining. (Ryan 2016)

As for the issue of cultural legitimacy, the network seems on the right track: *Jane the Virgin* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* both won Golden Globes in 2015 and 2016, a first for The CW.

Despite these major transformations, The CW’s first years were not just a draft waiting to be tossed by Pedowitz and his team. The CW today is still the *Gossip Girl* network: key elements that are part of today’s success emerged from the experiments with *Gossip Girl*. Ostroff’s strategy relied on narrowcasting, branding, and transmedia to attract and keep a very specific share of the audience in order to create a viable fifth network at the beginning of the post-network era. The network’s first years demonstrated that serialized shows are better adapted to a television economy less reliant on syndication re-runs than it once was. Pedowitz and his team (which includes Rick Haskins and Kevin Levy, who have been part of the network’s executive team since it launched in 2006) have benefited from the network’s early experiments, as tenden-

cies that were emerging then have since redefined the structure of the television industry.

The CW’s digital strategy has thus expanded, the network multiplying the number of platforms on which its programs are available. It no longer fears losing viewers, and now encourages them to switch between platforms such as The CW website or The CW app for day-after viewing; Netflix to binge entire seasons once they’ve aired on the network; or YouTube for extra content associated with the shows. While the network tries to “keep its content in-house on its own website longer” (Madler 2016), it also takes advantage of the specificity of each platform. For instance, the YouTube channel of Rachel Bloom (co-creator of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*) is used to provide viewers with uncensored versions of the show’s songs, each clip ending with a reminder that the show is on Mondays at 8/7c on The CW.

The network’s sudden interest in DC Comics superheroes is not only linked to the great narrative potential of the DC universe, but also to the way this potential can be exploited across “all of Warner Bros.’ businesses” (Rogers 2009). DC Comics has belonged to Warner since 1969. Pedowitz was called to The CW only two years after the creation of DC Entertainment as a division of Warner Bros., “a new company founded to fully realize the power and value of the DC Comics brand and characters across all media and platforms” (Rogers 2009). The superhero shows are thus part of the synergy encouraged by conglomeration.

One tagline for *Gossip Girl* was: “You’re nobody until you’re talked about,” and it could sum up The CW’s strategy since it launched in 2006. While all that mattered at first was to be talked about, even if it meant becoming the OMFG network, it is now essential that the network control the narrative. Based on its programming and digital strategy, The CW has been trying to brand itself as a legitimate player in the TV industry. Its evolution points to the efficacy of a strategy shaped by economic, cultural and technological convergence in the post-network era.

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The Flash (2014-)
Gilmore Girls (2000-2007)
Gossip Girl (2007-2012)
Jane the Virgin (2014-)
Legends of Tomorrow (2016-)
Melrose Place (2009-2010)
Privileged (2008-2009)
Smallville (2001-2011)
Stylista (2008)
Supergirl (2015-)
Valentine (2008-2009)
The Vampire Diaries (2009-2017)
Veronica Mars (2004-2007)