Entertainment Tonight: Tabloid News
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Abstract: Much of the television schedule is taken up by programs that seem like “filler” to many critics, but here Anne Helen Petersen shines a light on the often-ignored realm of tabloid news via the influential and still-popular landmark *Entertainment Tonight*. Petersen’s account highlights how scheduling practices, regulation, and ownership can all have powerful impacts on a wide range of media content.

Until the early 1980s, “first-run” syndicated programming—that is, programming created for initial airing in syndication, not reruns—was limited to a “ghetto of game shows, talk shows and cartoons.” *Entertainment Tonight* (syndicated, 1981–present) gentrified that ghetto, changing the way that both television producers and stations conceived of first-run syndication and its potential profitability. Indeed, if you flipped through the channels between the evening news and the beginning of primetime during the 1980s, you would almost certainly happen upon a now-familiar sight: the wholesome face of Mary Hart, reporting on the latest happenings in Hollywood. As the host of *Entertainment Tonight*, Hart helped popularize a new mode of celebrity gossip in which stories on the private lives of stars and celebrities comingled with reportage of box office receipts and on-set exclusives.

Since its debut, *ET* has become one of the longest running, most consistently profitable programs on the air. In the 1980s, it readied the way for a profusion of entertainment news programs and venues that now form a major node in the media landscape, from E! to *Entertainment Weekly*. Yet *Entertainment Tonight’s* success must be situated amidst a constellation of technological and regulatory changes, from the spread of cable and satellite technology to the gradual repeal of the Financial and Syndication Rules and other anti-monopoly regulations. This essay positions *ET* within the greater industrial climate of the 1980s, underlining
the ways in which the program’s unmitigated success fundamentally altered the landscape of first-run syndication.

Beginning in the days of early radio, the Federal Communications Committee (FCC) blocked Hollywood studios from entering into broadcasting, fearing the consolidation of entertainment media into the hands of few. This practice continued when broadcasting expanded from radio to television, as the FCC blocked film studio attempts at entering into television, station ownership, cultivating “Pay-TV” options, or starting their own networks. At the same time, the FCC was wary of the existing networks, their growing power, and their apparent negligence of the mandate to use the airwaves for the public good. By the end of the 1950s, ABC, CBS, and NBC relied on programming which they owned or had invested in—a practice that may have streamlined profits, but also resulted in a schedule replete with derivative game shows and Westerns.²

The resultant crop of programming, famously deemed a “vast wasteland” by FCC chairman Newton Minow in 1961, encouraged FCC passage of the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules, otherwise known as Fin-Syn, in 1971. Fin-Syn prohibited the networks from securing financial interest in independently produced programming and syndicating off-network programming. Coupled with the Prime Time Access Rule (PTAR), Fin-Syn also limited the amount of programming that each network could produce for itself (such as news) and freed a portion of primetime from network control. The resultant time slots, dubbed “prime access,” would allow affiliates to program independently, hopefully with shows serving the local interest.

In short, the FCC blocked the networks’ attempt to vertically integrate, barring them from producing the content they distributed. With the passage of Fin-Syn and PTAR, the FCC also hoped to free broadcast hours from network-induced repeats, opening the airwaves to local interests and concerns. In several crucial ways, these regulations served that purpose, but failed to encourage local programming. When tasked with filling the hours vacated by PTAR, local stations usually opted for syndicated offerings from studios or independent production companies, which not only cost less, but brought in higher ad revenue.³ Without Fin-Syn and PTAR, Entertainment Tonight—a show produced by a major studio (Paramount) and broadcast during prime access—would not have been possible.

Entertainment Tonight was conceived by Alfred M. Masini, a former advertising executive and the creative force behind the hit music program Solid Gold. Masini came up with the idea for ET by studying what was not on the air—no one was providing “entertainment news” in the form of information on box office receipts, upcoming projects, Nielsen ratings, gossip, and personality profiles.⁴ But the particular brand of “news” that ET was prepared to offer was a commodity that consumers had no idea they were supposed to desire. Indeed, before 1981,
“almost no one, outside of pencil pushers in the business, had heard of television’s upfront ad-selling season” let alone attendance figures, production deals, and industry machinations.5

But if ET provided that news, Masini hypothesized, audiences would watch. As longtime ET host Mary Hart recalled, “Do people really want to learn all these details—the weekly TV show ratings, the top-grossing movies? If we present it concisely and regularly, the answer is yes, people do want to learn.”6 Hart’s rhetoric reproduced the implicit message of the program, which suggested that entertainment news, when offered concisely on a daily basis, accrues gravity and importance. In other words, ET supplied entertainment news and figures with such regularity that such information no longer appeared superfluous but necessary to make sense of the entertainment world.7

While Entertainment Tonight was introducing a new genre of programming, it was also proposing a novel model of distribution. ET, like Maisani’s other hits, was syndicated. For the previous thirty years, syndicated programs had been “bicycled” from station to station, airing in one market, then sent, via the mail, to another. As a result, the lag-time between production and airing could be weeks—unacceptable for a program promising up-to-date Hollywood news. Paramount offered a solution in the form of satellite technology. In exchange for control of the show, Paramount offered to install and lease dishes to any station willing to air ET.8 The offer resulted in a collection of 100 local stations equipped to receive the ET feed and a reach unthinkable without Paramount’s infusion of capital.9

Satellite distribution also allowed Entertainment Tonight “day and date” transmission, meaning the show could be aired the same day it was filmed. This promise of immediacy would prove quintessential to ET’s image. In the early 1980s, the weekend’s box office figures came in at noon on Monday. ET would tape its segment at 1:30 p.m., and the finished product would be seen across the nation within hours.10 As a result, ET even beat the long-established Hollywood trade papers Variety and Hollywood Reporter in announcing figures crucial to the industry. In truth, such immediacy mattered little to ET’s audience, the vast majority of whom had no fiscal investment in the media industry. But the distinction of ET as the “first in entertainment news” bestowed its viewers with the status of insiders and experts and, by extension, encouraged dedicated viewership.

ET’s cost and market penetration were unprecedented. Three months before it aired, ET had already been cleared in 100+ markets, reaching 77 percent of U.S. homes with all advertising spots sold for the year.11 In its first week on the air, ET made good on its promises to affiliates, earning a 12.6 national rating—enough to make it the highest-rated national newscast.12 But early reviews were not kind. The hosts were “dreadful”; the news was “so soft it squishes”; it was “People Magazine without that fine publication’s depth.”13 One critic deemed it a “press agent’s
dream,” calling out a recent on-set visit to Paramount-produced *Grease II* as pure promotional propaganda. In decrying *ET’s* intimacy with the industry, critics were in fact criticizing the designed cooperation between the production cultures at *ET* and the studios. In other words, *ET* was intended to be a press agent’s dream and serve as a promotional vehicle for Paramount, not an independent journalistic outsider. These functions were not intended to be visible to the average viewer, only the savviest of whom would even realize that the show was produced by the same corporation as *Grease II*.

Over the next decade, critics would continue to criticize *ET’s* relationship with Hollywood. According to one *Time* reviewer, “*ET* is a part of the phenomenon it covers, another wheel in the publicity machine it seeks to explain.” *ET* has built a “cozy, symbiotic relationship” with celebrities, and “[t]he show has dropped almost all pretense of being anything but an arm of the Hollywood publicity machine,” filled with “fluff indistinguishable from advertising.” Such assessments were not inaccurate, but perhaps missed the point, as *ET* had never aspired to function as a source for hard news or investigative journalism. From the start, *ET’s* tone has mirrored that of a traditional fan magazine, offering fawning, flattering portraits of the stars and Hollywood delivered by Hart and her various co-anchors in a bright, cheery fashion. While *ET* would not shy away from reporting on an existing celebrity controversy or scandal, the tone was never derogatory or denigrating. Most importantly, *ET* did not break such stories itself, lest it risk alienating a celebrity or publicist. The addition of entertainment news and figures helped *ET* gain credibility and attract a broader demographic, but it did not change the character of the relationship between the program and its subjects.

That relationship, however, was one of *ET’s* biggest assets. As *Variety* observed, the program is “a big wet kiss in terms of promotion of projects.” A single
appearance on *ET* could reach double, even triple the audience of a network morning show or late-night talk show.17 Such reach gave *ET* tremendous leverage, especially over publicists eager to place celebrity clients on the show. *ET* producers exploited this leverage to exact a host of demands, including exclusive footage, access to stars, and the right to air a film trailer before any other outlet.18 But *ET* needed celebrities and their publicists as much as they needed *ET*. “The reality is that we’re all in bed with each other,” said one top talent manager. “So nobody can tell anyone off. I need them. They need me.”19

*ET* attempted to make up for lack of hard content with snappy editing, musical accompaniment, and fast-paced storytelling. Producers livened up its otherwise soft approach with flashy graphics, sound effects, and quick cuts that add “potent” and attract audience members who are “video fluent,” thus manifesting a graphic mode that John T. Caldwell has termed “exhibitionism,” in which stylization and activity take precedence.20 In 1983, a typical program began with seven to eight minutes of industry news, delivered in the style of a nightly news program, followed by a “Spotlight” on celebrity and an on-set exclusive (a “Never-Before-Seen glimpse behind Johnny Carson’s desk!”). The show generally closed with an “in-depth” report on style, an industry trend, or “a look backward at entertainment of the past.”21

From time to time, a longer, more investigative piece or multi-part series would replace the final section. Because *ET* was shot on video, producers could easily and cheaply manipulate graphics and other visual framing devices (bumpers heading to and from commercials, “Next On” previews, logos). The cluttered aesthetic compensated for the otherwise “low” production values and, more importantly, guided viewer response and discouraged viewers from changing channels. The carefully orchestrated mix of content, oscillating between headlines and statistics, eye-catching imagery, and slightly longer interviews and features likewise prevented viewer fatigue with a particular segment.

Over the course of the 1980s, *ET* continued to grow. By September 1983, it trailed only *Solid Gold* (1980–1988) and *Family Feud* (1977–1985; 1988–1995; 1999–present) among syndicated programming with an 8.9 weekly rating, while its weekend show, *Entertainment this Week*, earned a 14.4.22 By the end of the decade, *ET* had established itself, in the words of one Hollywood observer, as “such an important component in the way the industry is covered by press and television that it would be difficult to imagine its absence.”23 According to Ron Miller, a journalist for the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, *ET*’s concept had “revolutionized the TV syndication business and proved that expensive, original non-network programming can be profitable to everyone.”24 *ET* prided itself on its success, collecting both of the above quotes for a full-page *Variety* advertisement that trumpeted the program’s success. With its placement in the leading
Hollywood trade, *ET* was effectively advising other Hollywood entities that the program had taken on a crucial promotional role within the industry and could not be ignored.

With the potential and profitability of the genre firmly established, imitators followed. Between 1981 and 1990, more than a dozen shows and pilots attempted to emulate the *ET* formula, including Metromedia’s *All About Us* (1984); Paramount’s *America* (1985); King World’s *Photoplay* (1986); Tribune Entertainment’s *Public People, Private Lives* (1988–1989); TPE’s *Preview* (1990); Twentieth’s *Entertainment Daily Journal* (1990–1992); and Viacom’s *TV Star* (1980), *Entertainment Coast to Coast* (1986), *Exclusive* (1988), and *America’s Hit List* (1990). Some shows, such as the pilot for *All About Us*, were clear attempts to create cross-media promotion for print publications, while others, such as Twentieth’s *Entertainment Daily Journal*, attempted to provide promotion for parent companies, in this case Fox/News Corporation.

Imitators also struggled for a reason that had little to do with *Entertainment Tonight*. *ET* was innovative and addictive, but its initial clearances and subsequent growth took place during a period of high demand for syndicated programming. As the number of independent stations was growing (from 106 to 215 between 1980 and 1985), the number of shows being sold into “off-network” syndication (commonly known as reruns) was decreasing. The networks had become increasingly quick to cancel high-budget shows with mediocre ratings, and without at least a season or two already produced, a program could not be profitably sold into syndication. The lack of rerun material thus bolstered the first-run syndication market, which included shows like *ET*, *Solid Gold*, and a raft of game shows such as *Family Feud* and *Wheel of Fortune* 1983–present). *ET* and the game shows were joined in the late 1980s by televised tabloids— *A Current Affair* (1986–2005), *Hard Copy* (1989–1999), and *Inside Edition* (1988–present)—that distinguished themselves through interest in the weird, the tawdry, and other sensational subjects otherwise at home in tabloid journalism.

Each station’s schedule had a finite amount of “prime access” space between the evening news and primetime. Depending on the time zone and the length of the local news, a station had room for two, three, or maybe four half-hour “strips” at most. By the end of the 1980s, *ET*, *Wheel of Fortune, Jeopardy!* (1984–present), *A Current Affair* and *Inside Edition* had claims on all of the quality access time periods. A program might settle for a moderate number of access clearances, slowly building its audience. Yet any program attempting to emulate the *ET* formula needed to expend a similar amount of capital, which, by 1988, was $21 million per year, or $400,000 a week. In order to turn a profit, a new program required prime access clearance in a similar number of markets, generally upwards of 100. With so few access spots available, competitors faced nearly
insurmountable odds. *Entertainment Tonight*’s success throughout the 1980s was thus a result of its novelty, innovations, and the ruling logic of the conglomerate media industry.

In 2011, Mary Hart stepped down from *Entertainment Tonight* after twenty-nine years as co-host. While the show goes on, Hart’s exit signaled, however unofficially, the end of an era. The mode and speed with which *ET* disseminated “entertainment news” for the majority of Hart’s tenure was a thing of the past, replaced by online video, breaking news sent to mobile phones, and celebrity Twitter updates. The transformation was gradual: over the course of the 1990s, a raft of similarly-themed programming (*Extra, Access Hollywood*, the entire E! channel), all with backing from major media conglomerates, cut into *ET*’s market share. In the mid-2000s, the rise of gossip blogs further compromised *ET*’s hold. These early blogs—*Perez Hilton, Gawker, Just Jared, The Superficial*, and dozens of others—offered immediacy, a markedly snarky attitude, and a distinctly new media style of breaking and proliferating content that attracted millions of visitors. In contrast, despite a content-sharing partnership with Yahoo, *ET*’s web presence was negligible, attracting a mere 609,000 visitors in July 2007. Of course, *ET* has historically catered to a different (older, less technologically savvy) demographic, and most viewers were content with a self-contained, twenty-two-minute television program.

But in 2007, *TMZ on TV* expanded the parameters of the market. As the televised extension of *TMZ.com*, then garnering over 10 million unique visitors a month, *TMZ on TV* enjoyed a massive built-in audience, backing from Time Warner–owned Telepictures and AOL, and a clearance deal with FOX stations across the country. After one year on the air, it was available in 90 percent of American households, garnering an average Nielsen rating of 2.3. *TMZ* still trailed *ET*, but it brought in viewers who were both younger and male, and thus more valuable to advertisers. Most importantly, *TMZ* modeled a form of convergence in which content transitioned seamlessly from the web to the airwaves, edited to fit the specifics of each medium and its audience.

*ET* had to change its attitude towards breaking news and digital content lest it be left in *TMZ*’s dust. Between 2007 and 2010, it began broadcasting in HD, expanded to partner with *MSN.com*, and significantly updated its website to include many of the features found on *TMZ*, including streaming video, breaking news, photo galleries, Twitter updates, and the ability for users to share stories through social media.

While *ET* no longer enjoys the uncontested dominance that characterized its rein in the 1980s, perhaps we can gauge its importance somewhat differently. In 2011, *ET* maintained an average of 5.9 million viewers (more than the *CBS Nightly News*) and *ET*-style reporting on celebrity couples, movie grosses, and industry deals now
infuses everything from The Huffington Post to CNN. With Hart’s departure and the continued surge of web-based content, including “intimate” access to celebrities via social media, ET may decline. Or it may endure, catering to those who like their celebrity coverage cheery and fawning, working to adapt to the increasingly convergent media culture. Regardless of its eventual fate, it is clear that Entertainment Tonight fundamentally altered the landscape of first-run syndication, paving the path not only for Extra, Access Hollywood, and TMZ, but the infusion of “entertainment news” in all its various manifestations across the contemporary mediascape.

NOTES

8. The show’s ownership was a “patchwork” of production companies and cable providers: Paramount owned 40 percent, Cox Broadcasting-owned Telerep held 40 percent and Taft Broadcasting had the remaining 20 percent. Paramount was viewed as “the principal production entity,” in part due to its role in funding the installation of the satellite network.
18. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
32. For more on TMZ, see Petersen, “Smut Goes Corporate.”

FURTHER READING

