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This is a pre-print of a review whose final and definitive form has been published at

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Hilmes, Michele (ed), *NBC: America's Network*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2007, ISBN 978-0-520-25079-6 (cloth) ISBN 978-0-520-25081-9 (pbk), xii+362pp., US\$60.00 (cloth) US\$24.95 (pbk).

As Manuel Castells was publishing his landmark *The Network Society* in 1996, 'Must See TV' like *ER*, *Seinfeld*, *Suddenly Susan* and *Friends* were returning the TV network known as NBC to the dominant position in American broadcasting it had occupied so often in the 70 years since its founding. More recently, *30 Rock* has fictionalized life inside the Rockefeller Plaza headquarters of the network and its parent General Electric, and given Tina Fey a brief shot at the vice presidency.

But the broadcast networks that became 'an institutional and cultural form central to national identity and American life' within a decade of NBC's founding, are not so dominant in Castells' network society. (5) No longer 'mighty presences ... telling Americans who they were and what the parameters of their culture might be', they are now 'a few voices among many'. (311)

Michele Hilmes has collected an exceptional set of eighteen chapters by different authors, divided into four eras: the beginnings of radio broadcasting in the 1920s and 30s; the 'transitional decades' of World War 2 and the start of television; the classic network system from the 1960s until the mid-1980s; and the digital age since. The book does not try to be a comprehensive record of NBC and largely eschews biographies of the big personalities. It analyzes events and issues, individual programs and groups of programs that add up to a rich picture of a changing enterprise.

There are chapters on the early competition with CBS, the young NBC's relationship with business and organized labour, the FCC-forced divestiture of the NBC Blue Network that became ABC, the role of J.W. Thompson and other advertising agencies in early television, NBC's decline in the 1950s, its acquisition by General Electric in the 1980s and the subsequent purchase of Universal Studios to form NBC Universal in 2004.

Programs given chapters of their own are *America's Town Meeting of the Air* and *Star Trek*, whose histories with other networks as well as NBC provide fascinating sketches of the changing structures around them. Several chapters are devoted to program types—TV news documentaries during the early Cold War, satire since the 1960s ('What Closes Saturday Night'), NBC's failures with sexy dramas in the 1970s, children's programs and their regulation from the mid-1970s, and 'Life Without Friends' in the era of TiVo and

media clutter. The few exceptions to the almost complete absence of programs about the Holocaust during World War 2 get a chapter, as does the representation of race.

Broadcast networks, according to Hilmes and Shawn VanCour, are technological infrastructures, institutions with economic and social functions, and matrices that produce texts and scheduled flows of them, bringing different forces into contact, 'each with an agenda that leaves a mark on the central product'. They are also corporations and the images they create of themselves, 'imaginary universe[s], populated with characters, stories, places and celebrities'. (311-2) America's networks lie at the heart of 'as rambling and chaotic a media system' as any nation has produced. Yet this system proved remarkably durable, providing 'a de facto definition of American culture that matched its heterogeneous and creole identity far better than any homogenizing definition or institution ever could'. (310-1) Hilmes thinks 'It is doubtful that we will see again a broadcasting institution with NBC's dominance over the development of its times,' although the power first of Microsoft and now Google suggests the communications landscape is not done with monoliths. (260)

For an Australian reader, it is particularly notable that what this book describes as the classic American three-network system was over by the mid-1980s, before around a third of Australians even had three networks.

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