Promotional Prime Time: “Advertainment,”
Internal Network Promotion, and the Future of Canadian Television

Kyle Asquith & Alison Hearn
University of Western Ontario

ABSTRACT Drawing on critical cultural theory, the industry trade press, and an exploratory content analysis of prime-time television, this article examines the under-researched phenomenon of “internal network promotions.” The authors argue that internal promotions constitute a central component of the growing promotional orientation of Canadian prime-time television. They provide a theoretical overview of the practices of branding and a general description of the rise of “advertainment” on Canadian television. They then focus on the ways in which internal network promotions comprise a taken-for-granted “branded” backdrop against which television content, already heavily infiltrated by promotional interests, is mounted. The article concludes with a call for more research into the promotional nature of Canadian prime-time television and its social, political, and cultural implications.

KEYWORDS Television; Advertising; Promotional culture; Internal promotions; Network branding

On January 3, 2011, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) launched Live Right Now, “a national multi-platform health initiative” whose goal was to “in-
spire the nation to get healthy” (“CBC’s National Multi-platform Health Initiative,” 2011). This initiative included a dedicated website, the reality program Village on a Diet, a documentary series entitled Run Run Revolution, and numerous community events around the country, during which Canadians were exhorted to “join the Live Right Now community, create a personalized profile on LiveRightNow.ca, and meet some of their favourite CBC stars” (“CBC’s National Multi-platform Health Initiative,” 2011). Most notably, Live Right Now also included a series of CBC news reports, often lead stories, about health and exercise, which explicitly encouraged viewers to watch and/or engage in other Live Right Now initiatives. Although some might see this initiative as a positive example of the CBC’s mandate to create programming that appeals to all Canadians, we argue that Live Right Now is symptomatic of something very different and entirely more troubling; it is a premier example of the ever-growing practice of integrated television network branding and internal promotion in Canada—a practice central to a more general process of “creeping promotionalism” on Canadian airwaves.

As CTV and other Canadian broadcasters establish their own internal creative agencies specifically designed to market their TV productions, specialty channels, and other media platforms (see Kohl, 2007c), this article examines the prevalence of internal promotion and network brand-building on Canadian network television. We contend that these developments are telling indicators of the degree to which broadcast television has become thoroughly saturated with promotional interests and argue that these interests are changing the look, tone, and feel of contemporary entertainment products. In what follows, we outline the contours of network internal promotions, begin to theorize about the more general promotional condition of contemporary culture, and trace some of the reasons why we are seeing so much more product integration and branded entertainment, or “advertainment,” on the airwaves in recent years. We then describe the fiscal and regulatory conditions that have encouraged this growth of promotionalism on Canadian television. Our discussion is supported by the results of an exploratory content analysis of the kinds and amounts of internal promotion on Canadian prime time since 2008.

It should be noted that what follows is a primarily theoretical introduction to a larger research project now under way, which investigates the institutional, regulatory, and aesthetic dimensions of “promotionalism” on Canadian prime-time television. We focus on the under-researched phenomenon of internal promotions here as way to introduce and illustrate this larger, multi-dimensional issue. This recent snapshot of the state of internal network promotion and branding is intended to help elaborate our theoretical framework and to demonstrate the pervasiveness of current network promotional efforts. In an era in which the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has lifted any regulation on the amount of advertising per hour of television, and in which Canada’s public broadcaster deploys news reports as promotional texts for its other entertainment products, we believe the time has come to begin a thorough interrogation of Canadian television’s increasingly promotional textual terrain and to engage critically with the implications of this growing trend.

**Internal promotions and network branding**

We define an internal promotion as any television message that promotes the broad-
casting station, network, other programming, or any other assets owned by the network’s parent company—including television channels, radio stations, print holdings, websites, mobile applications, or even Twitter accounts. Internal promotions come in the form of on-air promo spots (ranging from 10 seconds to one minute); short “bumpers” that identify the broadcaster (typically five seconds or less); onscreen watermarked network logo “bugs” that frequently appear for the duration of shows; “lower third” graphic animations superimposed on the bottom portion of the screen that promote upcoming shows, contests, or special events; or “credit squeezes” that literally squeeze a program’s end credits to the side so the remaining screen real estate can be used to promote other programming or media assets. Internal promotions are also increasingly working their way into television shows themselves. To promote the channel’s “Shark Week” programming event in 2008, the Discovery Channel superimposed a Shark Week logo on a shot of the sky in an unrelated documentary (Atkinson, 2008). And, as with the case of CBC, internal promotions are sometimes integrated into news and current events content; newscasters will promote a future program within the body of their reports.

Undoubtedly, commercial media have been branding and promoting themselves for well over a century. During the sensationalist “Yellow Press” era of American journalism at the turn of the twentieth century, newspapers like Pulitzer’s New York World and Hearst’s New York Journal went to great lengths to promote their own news “brands.” The New York Journal, for example, ran ads promoting itself with the tagline “If you don’t get the Journal, you don’t get the news” (Spencer, 2007, p. 82). Indeed, news has always played a central role in consolidating and promoting media brands. Although media self-promotion, as a general practice, and more specific elements, such as station/network IDs, have deep roots, numerous scholars agree that there is something noteworthy about the intensification of network/station branding over the past two decades.

In her 2007 book The Television Will Be Revolutionized, Amanda Lotz observes that broadcast networks have responded to increased competition from cable by increasing their own internal (or on-network) promotions dramatically: promotional content increased by five minutes per hour between 1989 and 1999. By 2002, American internal network promotions were occupying on-air commercial time valued at four billion dollars (Eastman, Newton, & Bolls, 2003). As Chan-Olmsted and Kim (2001, p. 79) point out, while television stations worried about “positioning” themselves in relation to competitors during the 1980s, by the end of the 1990s, networks and local stations began to explicitly construct their own brand identities. Branding constitutes a far more comprehensive and expensive undertaking than simple market positioning; a television network “brand,” according to Chan-Olmsted and Kim (2001), involves marshalling and deploying, via a series of strategic representational strategies, a totality of feelings, associations, and expectations. Internal promotions, of course, play a central role in the creation and propagation of strategic television brands. And, as our research shows, the practices of internal on-network promotion are now well established on Canadian broadcast television, comprising more than one-quarter of all promotional elements aired on the major networks.
The frequency and prominence of internal promotions on Canadian television can be attributed to a number of factors. The rise of internal promotions runs parallel to the increasing variety of TV programming that began in the 1980s as a result of the proliferation of cable, digital, and specialty channels. VH1 was one of the first channels to permanently feature a station-identifying “bug” in the corner of the screen; it wanted to ensure that viewers, particularly those completing Nielsen diaries, did not mistake the channel for MTV (Atkinson, 2008). As audiences have become increasingly fragmented and armed with remote controls and personal video recorders (PVRs), broadcasters must work harder to “brand” themselves in order to build and retain audience share. As noted above, broadcasters are creating their own internal ad agencies dedicated to the in-house production of brand promotions. Broadcasters also utilize various internal promotions to protect their investments in expensive programming. Conversely, broadcasters leverage their exclusive rights to major televised events (sports championships, the Olympics, and award shows) to promote their other programming and their own entertainment brand. For instance, broadcasters use the Super Bowl as a “way of reinforcing current programming, as well as previewing future programming among an unusually diverse target demographic” (Alessandri, 2009, p. 151).

In spite of these developments, internal promotions have received limited attention from scholars. Eastman and her colleagues have published empirical research on American internal promotions, including extensive content analyses (see Eastman, 2003; Eastman & Billings, 2004; Eastman & Newton, 1998; Eastman, Newton, & Bolls, 2003; Newton, Williams, Eastman, & Billings, 2009; and Walker & Eastman, 2003). However, much of this research comes from an atheoretical “administrative” Communication Studies paradigm. Comparing a wide array of variables, Eastman’s research attempts to determine the effectiveness of internal promotions without critically theorizing the implications of this promotional carpet bombing or questioning the very existence of these promotional elements in the first place. Similarly, Chan-Olmsted and Kim (2001) consider branding from the perspective of general managers at local television stations. This questionnaire-based ethnographic research reveals how notions of “branding” are internalized by station managers as well as how proclaimed “news leadership” is used to promote local stations. However interesting its findings might be, this work fails to place these trends within their broader historical, institutional, and cultural contexts.

Other researchers have addressed internal promotions from critical political-economic and cultural studies perspectives. McAllister (2010) examines the creeping internal promotions on college football broadcasts but links these practices to the role college sports play in the political economy of American television. Likewise, McAllister and Giglio (2005) theorize how various promotional elements, including “synergistic” internal promotions, create a “commodity flow” on American children’s television. Meech’s (1996) analysis of Scottish television network promotions includes a historical review of newspaper branding, a consideration of the role of United Kingdom television deregulation and the increasingly fragmented audiences during the 1990s, and a well-defined critical theoretical framework. As we do in the analysis below, Meech draws on Andrew Wernick’s (1991) work on promotional culture, placing the intensi-
ification of television branding within the larger trend of “promotional reflexivity” rampant in late-modern culture.

Internal promotions have been neglected by current scholarship on Canadian television, even as the Canadian political and economic landscape has provided ripe conditions for their proliferation. Our focus here is on the ways in which internal promotions comprise a taken-for-granted “branded” backdrop against which media content, already heavily infiltrated and conditioned by promotional interests, is mounted. Internal promotions are a form of “meta-promotion” insofar as they promote the agents of their own production (corporate media conglomerates); so, as we consume entertainment products and advertising for other goods and services, we are never allowed to forget about the media brand through which these products are brought to us. Internal promotion works to consolidate viewer brand loyalty every viewing minute and through every means available.

Branding and promotional culture
Wernick’s 1991 book *Promotional Culture* provides the main theoretical framework for this research. Breaking with traditional views of advertising, which see production and consumption as conceptually distinct areas of consumer culture, Wernick insists that the commodity form cannot be separated from its promotional form and that consumption activity is bound to the production of promotional meanings and brands. Wernick locates the first successful branding exercise in the development of the distinct style of Wedgwood pottery in the mid-1700s, noting how “the substance, shape, and ornamentation of Wedgwood’s plates and vases were continuous with how they were promoted” (1991, p. 15). In this early moment of industrial capitalism, we see the rise of “market-oriented design,” whereby “production and promotion [are] integrally co-joined” (1991, p. 15). As consumer culture develops throughout the twentieth century, industrially produced goods come to serve, simultaneously, as useful commodities and as advertisements for their corporate brand; the commodity form produces its own promotional skin, becoming a “commodity sign.” Wernick goes on to argue that, in this age of advanced post-Fordist capitalism, promotionalism has become the dominant symbolic language and mode of expression in the West, marking the extension of market values and commodity relations into all areas of life.

Echoing the work of other post-structuralist theorists, such as Baudrillard, Wernick defines the promotional message as a “complex of significations, which at once represents (moves in place of), advocates (moves on behalf of) and anticipates (moves ahead of) the circulating entity ... to which it refers” (1991, p. 182). Promotion entails a rearrangement of the relation between sign and referent. The sign comes to displace the material object to which it refers, and, in this way, acquires a kind of agency: “in this integrated system of production/promotion, the commodity and its double—the commodity sign and the promotional sign—are deployed together in a mutually referring and self-confirming way” (1991, p. 16). Goods come to be designed less for their direct usefulness and more for the meanings and myths they are able to mobilize and represent. As a result, consumers do not simply “buy” for utility, but, rather, “buy into” access to cultural meaning and status.
For Wernick, promotion is a speech act, “a mode of communication, a species of rhetoric ... defined not by what it says but by what it does” (1991, p. 184); it works to perpetually persuade. As a result, promotional discourse is always already political. A culture marked by the ubiquity of promotional discourse is a truly postmodern one, signalled by a lack of trust in language. Here what matters most is not “meaning” per se, or “truth” or “reason,” but “winning”—attention, emotional allegiance, and market share. Promotionalism, as a foundational component of commodity exchange and of most contemporary social discourse, is thoroughly instrumental; its function is to bring about some form of “self-advantaging exchange” (1991, p. 181). Our clothes, our cars, our homes, even our own senses of self are intricately bound up with the meanings of corporate brands and promotional messages; goods, services, corporations, and people are all implicated in the logic of promotion.

The figure of the “brand” is the apotheosis and central representative figure of a promotional culture. The term “brand” is most commonly understood to stand for a distinct form of marketing practice, intended to link products and services to resonant cultural meanings through the use of narratives and images. In recent years, the practices of branding have moved from attempting to directly discipline consumer taste to working more indirectly by constructing a particular ambience for consumption, comprised of sensibilities and values, which may then condition consumer behaviour. A brand no longer refers to a simple commodity but to an entire “virtual context” for consumption; it “stands for a specific way of using the object, a propertied form of life to be realized in consumption” (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 344). The material form of the brand as an image, logo, or trademark is the first line of any marketing strategy. The brand or logo comes to stand as the face of a corporation, good, or service and functions as a central point of mediation between the branded product or service and the consumer. While the object of the logo or trademark was initially to guarantee quality, it has now become the sign of a definite type of social identity, which summons consumers into relationship with it. The material brand is the ultimate image-commodity: a fetish object par excellence, pursued and paid for by consumers who wish to become a part of its fabricated world of purloined cultural meanings. Brands, then, are both trademarked image-objects and sets of relations and contexts for life, becoming the ground and comprising the tools for the creation of self and community (see Arvidsson, 2005; Holt, 2002). A brand is also a value-generating form of property in its own right; recognized as such by trademark licensing law and, since the 1980s, by corporate accounting practices, a brand is a distinct, albeit intangible, commercial asset. Brands generate value for their corporate owners in and through the practices described above, essentially monetizing the symbolic meaning-making activities of consumers. Agencies such as Interbrand are dedicated to determining brand value and measuring brand equity by the extent to which consumers recognize, use, and live through the brand (Lury, 2004).

As many political economists have noted, the practices of branding comprise a rigorously instrumental set of commercial activities linked to the hegemony of the post-Fordist capitalist mode of production, which is based on strategies of permanent innovation, mobility and change, subcontracting, and just-in-time, decentralized production (see Harvey, 1990). Post-Fordism is heavily dependent on communication net-
works and on lateral flows of information and production, as opposed to hierarchical ones. As a result of instantaneous communicative capacities, new technologies, and mediatization, the creation and deployment of ephemeral images comes to play a larger role in capital accumulation: “investment in image-building ... becomes as important as investment in new plants and machinery” (Harvey, 1990, p. 288). The post-Fordist mode of production, then, relies heavily on the production and consumption of knowledge and symbolic products, emphasizing packaging, image, design, and marketing over concrete material production. Here branding, as an “institutionalized method of practically materializing the political economy of signs” (Goldman & Papson, 2006, p. 328), becomes “a core activity of capitalism” (Holt, 2006, p. 300).

Critical marketing theorists Goldman and Papson (2006) underscore the inherent commercial value lodged in the circulation of promotional signs as cultural environment. They provide a view of the contemporary Western mediascape as “hypersignified,” marked by the speed-up of the circulation of sign formats and meanings, which are always struggling to stay ahead of consumer exhaustion. This process, they argue, only works to “further alienate viewers, whose interpretive work is required to keep the sign circulation process humming along” (Goldman & Papson, 2006, p. 351). And, as critical marketing theorist Arvidsson (2005) points out, branding extracts profit from the meaning-making activities, emotional investments, and lived experience of individuals, producing aestheticized modes of justification for life under capital.

As Wernick reminds us, the communicative practices of promotionalism in the form of branding constitute the deep commodification of culture, whereby our values and commonly used symbols are colonized by the market and put to work to sell. As a result, even as it might be semiotically complex, promotionalism is a homogenizing cultural force; it flattens distinctions between people, social relationships, and things. So, while marketers work to produce uniqueness and distinctiveness for individual commodities in and through branding and advertising, as the culturally dominant form of signification, these practices become the medium through which culture “impresses the same stamp on everything” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1999, p. 32). The dominance of marketized or promotional discourse gives us very strict, delimited terms and aesthetic options within which to constitute our senses of self, community, and nation.

Leiss, Kline, Jhally, and Botterill (2005) note the way in which the aesthetics of promotional appeals have recently turned inward to narrativize and mythologize the very processes of promotional production themselves. These authors trace the emergence of a new “cultural frame” for the advertisement of goods, which they call *mise-en-scène*, where advertised goods are reflexively placed within the spectacular context of media industry production; advertisers increasingly use the heavily mediated terrain of mainstream cultural production, such as television and film sets, as the context for their appeals, foreground celebrity culture and narratives of fame and attention, and address consumers as highly media savvy. In this current cultural frame, then, “the American Dream has been fully absorbed by the Hollywood fantasy” (Leiss et al., 2005, p. 566).

This promotion of the mechanisms of promotion, or “meta-promotional” trend, is not only a feature of product advertisements, but is also exemplified by the plethora of internal broadcast network ads, bumpers, graphics, and brand appeals that have
been increasing in frequency on broadcast television over the past several decades. Taken together they illustrate a self-reflexive turn in network television content, characterized by what Deery (2004, p. 1) has termed, “advertainment”: programming that sells as it entertains. Advertainment breaks down the barriers between entertainment and advertising, underscoring television's authoritative gaze and privileged position within an increasingly promotional culture; it encompasses the totality of practices used to promote media brands and “external” advertisers, or both, simultaneously. In what follows we offer a brief description of the rise of advertainment and then turn to a central component of Canadian television’s promotional turn—internal network appeals and branding efforts.

The fall of the 30-second spot and the rise of advertainment

Not since the invention of the remote control has the advertising industry expressed so much concern over viewer “ad avoidance” (see Cooper, 2009; Sass, 2009). New technological services and consumer products now allow viewers to consume television content in alternative ways. The past decade witnessed the rise of digital personal video recorders, video-on-demand services, DVD and Blu-ray television box sets, and television streamed over the Internet and wireless networks to computers, tablet devices, and smartphones. As a result, although television viewers are still important targets for national advertisers, the 30-second spot is no longer a guaranteed way to reach them. “Bread and butter” national television advertisers like Procter & Gamble (P&G) have reduced their traditional television media buys up to 25% over the past decade (Flint & Steinberg, 2005).

A common solution to these concerns has been to place advertising within television content, practices that fall under the labels “product placement,” “integration,” or “branded content.” Although the integration of advertising into televisual “content” has a very long history—in 1896, the Lumière Brothers prominently placed Sunlight detergent in a film in exchange for financial support—the practices have become increasingly central to the North American television industry (Chang, Newell, & Salmon, 2009). Product placements or brand “integrations” range in prominence, from branded packages “serendipitously” appearing in the background of sets to long-term, planned, and complex deals that allow brands to drive the narrative of entire shows. For example, telecommunications company Verizon was instrumental in the development of the CW program *Gossip Girl*; high school characters drive the show’s narrative by constantly using their Verizon phones to call, text, and take pictures at parties (Steinberg, 2007). Creative producers worked NuvaRing posters into the background of shots in medical shows like *Scrubs*, and even integrated the 1960s versions of Heineken, Cadillac, and Jack Daniel’s into the AMC drama *Mad Men*. Brand integration is perhaps most prominent on “reality” TV programs in the United States and Canada. CTV’s *Canadian Idol* has featured host Ben Mulroney and contestants eating Kraft Dinner, contestants waiting in the P&G backstage/makeup room, and audience members sitting in special TD Canada Trust seats (Kohl, 2008). Kraft, P&G, and LG Electronics have secured integration deals in CityTV’s *Canada’s Next Top Model* (Kohl, 2007a). Global has even produced “virtual” product placements—billboards for Ontario’s Casino Rama on a New York City taxi cab—during simulcasts of NBC’s *The Apprentice*.
(Poulton, 2006). The process of retrofitting older television series with product placement is also well under way.

A second way of counteracting audience “ad avoidance” involves placing show content into traditional commercial breaks (pods) in order to bait PVR viewers into watching advertisements. According to an executive at PHD, a global advertising agency, advertisers want “viewers to see an hour program as one hour, as opposed to content, then ads, then content, then ads” (quoted in Frutkin, 2007). This tactic is known in the industry as “podbusting.” Transitions into commercial pods and back to shows have become seamless; for example, the camera zooms “through” a television set on the show to reveal the first spot. In some cases, commercials adapt the look, feel, and tone of the shows within which they are placed. In 2006, Ford teamed up with Global to produce spots that “flowed out” of (the American-produced) Prison Break, House, and Las Vegas. These program-specific commercials incorporated characters and narratives from the episodes. Advertisers create ads that deliberately mimic the style and characters of the program; Dove recently released a series of ads in the style of Mad Men, which aired only during Mad Men episodes (Elliot, 2010). MTV Canada hosts sometimes appear midway through commercial pods to answer calls and emails (Kohl, 2007b). CNN has experimented with a split screen during commercial pods; one side of the screen shows commercial spots while the other gives a “backstage” glimpse of what is happening in-studio during the break (Steinberg, 2010). Advertisers are participating in “content wraps,” where sponsored behind-the-scenes vignettes air during commercial pods. The ad avoidance practices of viewers, the corresponding integration and podbusting efforts of broadcasters, and new audience metrics that actually measure the size of advertising viewership (not simply program viewership) all enable the steady growth of a promotional television landscape.

These innovations in external advertising are shared by network broadcasters, who are working to extend their own economic viability by marketing themselves (as brands) in earnest via all manner of internal promotional tactics and multi-platform appeals. Moreover, all of these promotional efforts have been greatly facilitated by recent changes in the Canadian economic and regulatory climate.

Canadian media conglomerates, deregulation, and promotional free-play

Canadian broadcasters are struggling to retain economic and cultural relevance; costs are up, revenues are down, and profit margins are at their lowest in decades. Advertising dollars have followed Canadian audiences as they migrate away from broadcast television to specialty cable or consume television online or on mobile devices. Exacerbating long-term industry problems, Canadian media conglomerates have taken additional hits as a result of the larger global financial crisis. From 2008 to 2009, Canadian broadcast television revenues showed the lowest year-to-year increase in a decade. Broadcast advertising revenues were down 8.4% in 2009, the first drop in over a decade (Kuburas, 2010b). In 2008, Canadian broadcasters tightened budgets, slashed jobs, and cut programming. Hardest hit was CanWest Global, which was forced to enter bankruptcy protection in 2009.
The first “wave” of twenty-first-century Canadian media consolidation unfolded in 2000, when CanWest Global expanded its media reach through Southam/Hollinger newspaper acquisitions and BCE created a media empire by purchasing CTV and the Globe and Mail. The second wave of convergence occurred in 2006-07, when CTVglobemedia purchased the CHUM-City radio and television holdings, including specialty services such as MuchMusic, Bravo!, and Space. This acquisition also saw Rogers take ownership of the CityTV network in order to prevent CTV from owning multiple local broadcast stations in a single market. CanWest Global responded to the CTVglobemedia deal by acquiring Alliance Atlantis’ menu of specialty television channels. The third and most recent wave of acquisitions saw the bankrupt CanWest Global fall into the hands of the Shaw Communications cable empire. Bell Canada then announced its intention to take full control of CTVglobemedia.

In 2011, three broadcast distributors controlled Canada’s private English broadcast networks: Rogers (CityTV), Shaw (Global), and Bell (CTV). Each of these networks is connected to an array of specialty cable, radio, online, and print holdings. As a result, the CRTC recently completed a hearings process on the issue of vertical integration. Of particular concern to the CRTC were the ways these vertically integrated companies could lock Canadians into electronic gated communities. For example, the CRTC recognized that Bell, given its role as both a distributor (providing mobile and satellite television) and content producer (owning networks and specialty channels) could make CTV television shows exclusively available to Bell subscribers. In the end, the CRTC ruled that vertically integrated media companies must make broadcast content available to a competitor’s subscribers (including cable, satellite, and mobile subscribers); content created for new media platforms such as mobile phones and tablets, however, can still be offered exclusively to a vertically integrated company’s own subscribers.

While the CRTC’s decision focuses on the technological methods of keeping subscribers trapped within the confines of a vertically integrated media conglomerate, it neglects the fact that viewers are constantly being solicited to join the electronic gated communities of Rogers (CityTV), Shaw (Global), or Bell (CTV) through media branding and internal promotional efforts. Canada’s private broadcasters create what McAllister and Giglio (2005, p. 34) refer to as “synergistic commodity flow.” McAllister and Giglio argue that media corporations create efficiencies by pushing “promotional synergies, whereby any given property is used to promote other properties or an overarching corporate brand” (2005, p. 38). Through the extension of their brand identity, which is reinforced by perpetual internal promotions, these companies invite audiences to stay within the confines of their own holdings, directing them to their radio, specialty cable, mobile, and online platforms, products, and services.

Canada’s public broadcaster, the CBC, also struggles to defend its relevance in a changing television environment. The CBC faces the additional burden of being accountable to Parliament—no small task in a neoliberal political climate that celebrates privatization and the free market and vilifies government spending. In March 2009, the CBC, forecasting a $171-million budget shortfall for the year, announced some 800 layoffs across the company (Strauss, 2009). In light of these grim economic circum-
stances, the CBC has turned to “advertainment” just as much as, if not more than, the three private English broadcast networks. The CBC’s May 2010 “upfront” presentation—an event that allows the CBC to pitch fall programs and sponsorship opportunities to media buyers—offered potential advertisers “an expanded palette of cross-platform strategies designed to offer advertisers more comprehensive, integrated opportunities” (Bailey, 2010).

Arguably, the dire economic conditions for Canadian broadcasters, along with successive federal governments committed to neoliberal policies, have given rise to a penchant for deregulation at the CRTC. Although the Commission has traditionally been charged with overseeing the quantity and content of broadcast advertising, several recent decisions reveal that the CRTC is not interested in restricting television promotionalism in any way. In May 2007, the CRTC announced a new television policy framework for conventional broadcasters, which included a staggered plan to loosen regulations concerning the number of advertising minutes permissible during prime time. The long-standing restriction of 12 minutes of advertisements per clock hour became 14 minutes as of September 1, 2007, 15 minutes as of September 1, 2008, and, as of September 2009, limits were suspended completely.

This decision was couched in arguments about how greater advertising revenue helps private broadcasters deal with fragmented audiences, competition, and HD/digital conversion costs, and enables them to invest additional funds in Canadian programming. In reality, the decision effectively freed up Canadian broadcasters to turn their prime-time programming hours into advertainment. Although the CRTC has never regulated product integration in any consistent way, in 2005 it classified the TVA (Québec) reality program *Ma maison Rona* as an infomercial due to excessive Rona branding; as an infomercial, the show no longer qualified as Canadian content. After the CRTC’s advertising deregulation in 2007, however, television programs could no longer be considered “excessively” promotional. In the same 2007 television policy framework, the CRTC made it clear that the Commission had no interest in regulating “non-traditional advertising” either, including onscreen graphics and product placements, or any other kind of promotional innovation. Indeed, internal promotions for Canadian programs and all forms of station IDs have not been counted as advertising by the CRTC since 1987 (see Department of Justice, 1987, for definition of “advertising material”). This exemption now extends to all specialty cable channels and to the promotion of shows aired on one channel by another “sister” channel (see CRTC, 1999, para. 80). As all of these facts indicate, current CRTC regulators are disinclined to even begin to consider the growing promotional nature of Canadian television as a problem. On the contrary, they clearly see it as a functional necessity.

**Tracking internal promotions**

During the fall of 2008, spring of 2009, and fall of 2010, we tracked the amount of internal promotional content on three major Canadian channels—CBC, CTV, and Global—during the prime-time hours of 8:00 p.m. until 11:00 p.m. Content on these networks was recorded for seven nights: three in October 2008, three in February 2009, and one in December 2010. This content was then reviewed and coded for all kinds of internal promotional elements. These elements consisted of the following:
• 10- to 30-second “on-air promotions,” housed in traditional commercial pods, for other network programming
• 10- to 30-second on-air promotions for the network itself or another “asset” of the station or larger ownership entity (ranging from globaltv.com to CBC Radio to a sister specialty station, etc.)
• 5- and 10-second “closed captioned by” or “brought to you by” sponsorship billboards that promote other network programming or media assets
• “bumpers,” less than 5 seconds in length, for specific shows “up next,” or for generic station IDs
• hybrid co-promotions, in which station, show, or contest promotion is married to another sponsor or advertiser
• onscreen network “bugs,” brands, or logos, often onscreen for the duration of the program
• “lower third” animations, animated graphics that appear over the lower third of the screen and identify the current show, list upcoming programming, promote contests, and/or direct viewers to websites
• “crawls,” text-only promotions for websites, contests, or upcoming programming on the lower third of the screen during programs or commercials
• “credit squeezes,” in which a program’s end credits are literally squeezed to one side of the frame so the remaining visual real estate can be used to promote other programming or media assets
• any direct promotional work by on-air personalities for other network programs or assets, such as Peter Mansbridge directing viewers to CBC Radio for additional details on a story

Finally, we counted the number of traditional commercial advertisements so we could calculate the ratio of internal promotions to ads.

Our findings about the amount of Canadian prime-time television devoted to internal promotion are sobering but not surprising. Perhaps the most notable of our findings is that the average number of ads a Canadian viewer can expect to see from 8:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. on one of the three major broadcast networks has increased from 82 in 2008-09 to 96 in December 2010. Of course, given the CRTC’s deregulation of advertising, this is to be expected. Once internal promotional elements are added, however, the numbers increase dramatically. If we average the numbers of ads and internal promotions over the past two years, Canadian viewers saw a total of 115 promotional messages from 8:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. If we add all the graphics, bugs, and credit squeezes into the mix, the number rises to 122 in this three-hour period. Our research indicates that viewers see an average of 31 internal promotional messages per night; 29% of all promotional elements on the three major networks are devoted to internal promotions. If we factor in lower-third graphics, bugs, and credit squeezes, the number of internal promotions rises to 38 in an evening, or 31% of total promotional content.

Keep in mind that these are averages. The CBC showed a staggering 59 different internal promotions on the evening of October 28, 2008, and CTV showed 45 on December 16, 2010, which reveals that the networks differ in their deployment of internal
promotional tactics. Global and CTV share a similar ratio of ads to internal promotions; approximately 25% of all promotional elements on both Global and CTV are internal promotions. When graphics are factored in, we can see a notable difference between the two private broadcasters: Global’s percentage of ads to internal promotions rises to 33%, while CTV’s rises to 28%. But the CBC leads in this regard, devoting 33% of advertising inventory to internal promotions; with graphics added in, the number rises to 39%.

We have hypothesized several possible reasons for the differences in internal promotional percentages between Global, CTV, and the CBC. First, unlike the other Canadian networks, where prime-time programming is often anchored by already well-promoted American shows, the CBC must put more effort into securing viewers. After all, if the CBC does not promote its prime-time block of exclusively Canadian productions, who else will? In addition, because the CBC produces 90% of its own programming, it is able to offer more opportunities to integrate brand messages into content than Canadian private broadcasters who purchase American programming; in 2009, for example, TD Canada Trust was worked into the scripts of *The Border* and *Being Erica* (Kuburas, 2009). The notable increase in the use of lower-third graphic promotions on Global can easily be accounted for by its recent economic woes. Clearly, Global would rather eat into programming time with in-show graphic promotions than reduce its money-making commercial inventory. At the time of our research, Global was more interested in short-term cash flow than in building long-term brand equity through self-promotion.

Although the number of traditional advertisements has increased since 2008-09 across all three networks, the total number of internal promotions has remained relatively consistent in relation to the total number of ads, at 31%. This statistic tells us that internal promotional content appears to be a stable feature of the Canadian broadcast television terrain and shows no sign of diminishing. As broadcasters diversify the venues through which their content is pushed, the brand logo and identity become ever more critical to their success, working to attract and develop brand loyalty in viewers and users across media platforms. Internal on-air television promotions, then, may be read as foundational or “tent pole” components of these efforts. As noted above, the CBC’s *Live Right Now* campaign is one extended branding campaign for the network, under the guise of corporate responsibility. The network’s strategy of creating one umbrella CBC brand under which programming, news, Internet content, and live community events are grouped must be seen as of a piece with the internal promotions we have tracked above.

**Some implications of creeping promotionalism**

As promotional interests on broadcast television increasingly eclipse entertainment and educational content, the stories told inevitably reflect those promotional interests. The pervasive presence of internal network promotions and the intensification of network branding have significant implications for both programming content and journalistic integrity; both entertainment and news are critical to a healthy broadcasting system, and both are equally impacted by the “flattening” effects of promotional discourse. The CBC’s *Live Right Now* campaign is an example of this—a prime illustration
of “brand-inspired content.” While one could argue that broadcasters regularly produce programming in-house, what is new in this case is the generalized deployment of the CBC brand as the object cause of programming development. The CBC works to keep its own promotional concerns front and centre during its programming, on its website, and in its newscasts.

Indeed, entire production models have changed as promotional interests come to dominate entertainment or information; industry workers—show creators and journalists—are increasingly required to do the job of marketing and promotion. The issue of remuneration for writers forced to write promotional “webisodes” for show websites was at the centre of the last Writers Guild of America Strike in 2007-08, for example (Cieply, Carr, & Barnes, 2007). CBC producers and writers now do the work of copywriters as they promote other CBC entities (and their sponsors) within their creations.

In January 2010, CBC’s *Little Mosque on the Prairie* promoted the CBC’s Kraft Hockeyville contest and programming event. The episode featured Amaar Rashid, a fictional character, entering his fictional community, Mercy, Saskatchewan, into the “real” CBC contest. Viewers could then view his fictional “entry” on the Kraft Hockeyville CBC.ca microsite (Kuburas, 2010a).

In the wake of technological changes, increased competition, and “branded” newsrooms, journalists are forced to participate in the production of an “integrated news spectacle” (see Compton, 2004; Compton & Comor, 2007). Perhaps the most notable example is the CBC’s Peter Mansbridge. Long admired for his journalistic integrity, he is now regularly called upon to promote, in program, other CBC television and radio shows, contests, or events. Promotional rhetoric is fundamentally different from a news anchor’s expository style, yet Mansbridge shifts effortlessly back and forth between these two discursive modes, conflating any distinction between pressing world events and upcoming CBC programming. Although the social and political relevance of journalism is increasingly in question these days due to the rise of blogging and citizen journalism, arguably these innovations do not carry the same troubling implications as the fact that Mansbridge now regularly performs as corporate shill. What to make of the fact that Canada’s “most trusted name in news” is now also its most trusted pitchman? Surely this development has helped bring about general public skepticism about news and has serious implications for the level of public discourse and depth of political engagement? It is difficult to see how these new initiatives do anything but fundamentally betray the CBC’s Broadcasting Act obligations to “inform, enlighten, and entertain” and “contribute to shared national consciousness and identity”; the CBC is now better described as Canada’s promotional public broadcaster.

Have important conceptual distinctions traditionally marked by different discursive registers been flattened by the predominance of promotional discourse on television? How is the television viewer expected to understand and parse the differences between forms of television content when everything they now see is purely promotional and self-advantaging? We can easily argue that, as a result of these developments, the experience of prime-time television viewing has become an extended object lesson in the aesthetics and format of promotional appeals, simultaneously generating and naturalizing the values of promotion, branding, and commercialism. If we argue that
the commodity in the form of brand-identity is now the narrative set piece of prime-time television and that viewers “self-consume” a highly mediated and rationalized version of themselves when they watch (Berland, 1992, p. 40), we are left with the conflation of selves with commodities in an endless cycle of self-referential, persuasive signification serving the single interest of capital accumulation. Advertainment—media conglomerates’ brand circulation—and the internal promotions that comprise a central element of it can be read as the place where the dominant mode of production, transnational corporate capitalism, literally and figuratively becomes culture.

Conclusions
There can be no doubt that internal promotion, as a kind of meta-promotional discourse, is here to stay. Public networks, such as the CBC, need it in order to market their Canadian productions; they simply do not have the same luxury as CTV and Global, who can depend on the American networks to provide primary promotion for their programming. And networks, in general, require internal promotion to build brand identity and secure viewers’ eyeballs. The increasing deployment of network branding through internal promotions speaks to media conglomerates’ desire to continue to colonize and contain the entertainment and news landscape even as it proliferates, disperses, and diversifies across a range of technologies and media platforms. The “broadcasting” game is not about winning the ratings, or controlling the airwaves or even the cable lines anymore; it is about asserting the corporate brand as an overarching media portal and winning loyalty in viewers that can be carried across platforms, experiences, and generations.

But, as Lotz (2007) argues, no matter the format, internal promotion is eventually undermined by its own logic; as networks come to rely on their own air time as the “primary promotional venue” for their programming, they become doubly vulnerable to cable programming and other media forms that lure their audiences away. Internal promotions not only take up valuable ad time but also create a perpetual promotional backdrop, or mise-en-scène, for programming already heavily infiltrated by advertising and branding. The landscape of contemporary Canadian broadcasting, then, is now riddled with instrumental and commercial interests that effectively work to homogenize content. The deep divide between the high production values of cable television programming and the cheap “reality” and “lifestyle” focus of programming available on broadcast television is only becoming more and more obvious. As we watch Canadian broadcasters struggle with their economic woes by increasing the promotional nature of their programming, hyping their own brand identities at every turn, we can only wonder what the future of Canadian television broadcasting holds. Will network broadcasters eventually abandon programming content altogether in favour of a 24-hour stream of cheap advertainment?

The research presented here is intended to initiate a broader discussion about the social, political, and cultural consequences of Canadian television’s promotional turn. In this article, we have offered a theoretical framework, a preliminary content analysis, and a discussion of some of the possible consequences of intensified internal Canadian network promotion and branding. To be sure, much more scholarly work is necessary to trace the regulatory and institutional influences behind these significant transfor-
mations in the television landscape. But, even more than this, additional attention must be paid to the implications of these transformations for Canadian sovereignty, for the fair and equitable representation of the Canadian public in all of its diversity, and for the labour conditions of Canadian media workers. We invite other media scholars to join us in this project.

References


