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Television Strategies in Digital Media: How The Tonight Show Has Transformed in the Age of Digital Distribution

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Television Strategies in Digital Media:

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Julia Hansen

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Abstract

Digital Media has impacted the ways in which people consume and engage with media, and this change influences the strategies of television networks, from content style, production practices, and distribution methods. This study explores the implications of digital media in television strategies through the examination of NBC's *The Tonight Show*, first through a comparative analysis of historical host, Johnny Carson, to the show's most recent host, Jimmy Fallon. This analysis found that the two hosts have contrasting personalities which cater well to the audiences of their time. Additionally, it was discovered that the programming of the show has grown more segmented from historical episodes to modern-day, and there were more opportunities for audience engagement through social media. The results from this comparative analysis were then considered further through an analysis of *The Tonight Show's* YouTube channel. Videos from the YouTube Channel were studied to better understand the strategies of NBC in distributing their content digitally through this platform. The results of this analysis suggest that the programming methods of *The Tonight Show* are formatted in a way that allows for an easy transition into a digital media space and high audience engagement across multiple platforms.

Keywords: Television, YouTube, Digital Media, Media Consumption, Digital Distribution

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Introduction

For more than half a century, watching television has been a ritualistic pastime for Americans. With the introduction of the internet in the late 1990s, the ways in which people engaged with media began to shift. Web 2.0, which is the term used to encompass social media technologies such as Facebook or Twitter, was pivotal in changing the way that audience members consume media. This cultural shift meant significant adjustments were necessary for broadcast networks that wished to maintain followings for their television shows as the attention of consumers became harder to attain. Many networks have embraced this change and utilized the digital media space to further promote their shows and attract audience members. The literature demonstrates how digital media has redefined consumerism, how YouTube has risen as a primary source for media consumption, the changes in broadcast strategies over the last half-century, and finally, how television, specifically late-night television, has found success in the new digital space. To understand better the ways in which these changes have occurred and interacted with one another, this study utilizes a focused study on *The Tonight Show*. Through the observation and analysis of *The Tonight Show* in historical years in comparison to the show's methods of digital distribution today, this study aims to determine *The Tonight Show's* methods and how those methods advanced the program in the digital media space.

Increased Media Share-ability and Audience Engagement

Since the inception of the internet, and subsequent Web 2.0, the methods of mass communication have changed as the term *audience* has taken on new meaning. The audience member has shifted from being a passive consumer to being an active contributor. To understand the ways in which there has been a shift in audience power, it is important to understand how mass communication came to be functional. Since technologies like the radio and television were

created, mass communication was simply defined as the one-to-many dissemination of content to a large, homogenous group (Napoli, 2010). Newer technologies, such as the internet and social media, have allowed anyone to be the one to communicate with a large audience. This ability used to be reserved for a select few, but with singular use devices, audience members have a grander sense of autonomy that allows the masses to communicate to the masses (Napoli 2010; Stein, 2014). The autonomy gained by these technological advancements was pivotal for media consumption practices.

Digital media has heightened the ability of audience members to become engaged and has led to a concept known as participatory culture (Stein, 2014). As Jean Burgess says in their contribution to *Television as Digital Media*, "Today's audience isn't listening, it's participating" (2014, p.135). This ability has brought about a richer media consumption environment as audience members are able to interact with fellow fans and participate in online communities. While watching a show on the television, an audience member can simultaneously engage in conversations about the show on their additional smaller devices on platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, emulating the experience that they are watching the show while being surrounded by friends and family, even if they are physically watching it alone (Sørensen, 2015). Participatory culture has also further enhanced the dissemination of the originally considered homogenous audience. With the expansion of technology in the last several decades, consumers are faced with a vast array of options that weren't historically available. Because of the higher quantity of options available to them, consumers have gained a lot more independence in what media they choose to consume. In the example of broadcast television, "viewers first gained the convenience of defying networks' schedules with the VCR, which established a modest beginning that has since been expanded by DVRs and digital devices that integrate internet and television to vastly

expand consumer control” stated Amanda Lotz (2014, p.64). This shift in power for the consumers has led to the diffusion of the once singular viewing audience into the creation of many niche audiences. These niche audience groups range in levels of participation in the media, and how involved the consumer intends to be. By the nature of digital media platforms, audience members can be as passive or active as they’d like to be. They can choose to either consume media by simple means of just watching it, they can like or share online content related to the program, or they can create their own content that contributes to the show's fanbase. As Stein puts it, “all subcultures now have much greater communicative capacity” (2014, p.162). While these options were somewhat available to historically homogenous audiences, the rise of digital media has multiplied the ways in which they can participate while also making it visible to mass audiences. This interactive media environment has not only allowed consumers to create deeper relationships with their online community, but it has also increased the loyalty of audiences (Kim, 2012).

The visibility of fan interactions has placed a greater weight of control in the hands of the audience member. Not only are audience members consumers of media, but they have the power to send it or, as previously mentioned, create and produce content of their own. The audience member is now one of the greatest factors of mass communication as the new media environment “empowers the audience to serve as both receivers and senders of mass communication” (Napoli, 2010, p.511). As the definition of mass communication has evolved with the media environment, so has the definition of the consumer. With the rise of spreadable media, the definition of a fan has gone from being one based on identity to one based on action (Stein 2014). As this study continues to observe the dynamic shifts in media production, it is

important to understand the shifts that have occurred in the way that the audience is engaged and has gained strong consumer control.

Digital Distribution on YouTube

One of the online distribution platforms that has greatly contributed to the shift in mass communication and audience engagement is YouTube. Since the website's launch in 2005, the platform has grown to house tens of millions of visitors daily and holds access to content from television clips to music videos to amateur content creation. As described by Jin Kim in their *Media, Culture, & Society* journal article, "YouTube is a form of 'mass' communication because it has the potential to reach universal audiences, and also a form of 'self' communication because its content is self-generated" (2012, p.62). One of the key factors to YouTube's success is its accessibility. Users do not even need to create an account with the program in order to view any of the hundreds of thousands of videos for free as soon as they open up the webpage (Hilderbrand, 2007). This structure sets YouTube apart from other digital distribution platforms, such as Hulu or Netflix, because it does not require a paid membership fee, and it is also available, for the most part, worldwide (Kim 2012; Lotz, 2014). Another valuable characteristic of YouTube is the opportunities for participation. In the digital media age, any individual who owns a functioning smart phone can create, edit, and upload high quality content to social platforms for only a tiny fraction of the price of what it would have cost to do so a few decades ago. Not only are users able to create and upload content of their own, but they are also able to like/dislike and comment on their favorite videos as well as subscribe to their favorite channels. These features allow for participatory culture to thrive in this distribution environment, complimenting the modern-day communication methods.

As digital media has matured, so has YouTube. YouTube was acquired by Google in October of 2006, leading to the establishment of systems that generate ad revenue and capitalize on the success of the platform (Kim 2012). The systems that were implemented shifted the platform from being a place for amateur video sharing to a place where content creation had commercialized value. A major portion of the videos on YouTube is what is defined as “user-generated content.” User-generated content, or UGC, is a form of self-communication, as it is content that is created and posted by the everyday, or amateur, users of the platform. YouTube creators are individuals that have built their platform for themselves and share videos from their daily lives. An example of a UGC is vlogging. Vlogging (also known as video blogging) is where someone posts clips recording their life and takes the audience with them. Popular vlogs include travel vlogs, holiday vlogs, creators engaging in challenges, and many more. The introduction of UGC videos in digital media established a dynamic of authenticity (Burgess, 2014). However, as Google acquired YouTube, there became a place for Professionally Generated Content, also known as PGC, on the platform. The generation of ad revenue made it possible for YouTube to “evolve from an amateur user-generated content (UGC) medium to a professional broadcasting channel” (Kim 2012, p.54). Many television networks have created their own YouTube channels and signed agreements with YouTube to share in the ad revenue generated from their content (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz et al., 2016). The presence of both UGC and PGC videos on YouTube is what makes it such a unique distribution platform and is representative of the convergence of television and the web that has been developing since the internet’s creation and increasing cultural significance.

The PGC clips on YouTube have heightened the convenience for the show’s audience to watch specific moments from their favorite shows without the hassle of watching the live

broadcast, recording the show, or waiting through the longer commercial breaks on network television (Hilderbrand, 2007). Not only is YouTube convenient for consumers as it makes accessing their desired viewing point easier, but the amalgamation of content on the platform has developed the platform into an archive of media. Burgess considered user-created content to be a “significant source of our shared cultural experience” and “because of its openness and underdetermination, YouTube is producing significant public value as an accidental cultural archive” (Burgess, 2014, pp.320-326). The success of this cultural archive, however, would not have been possible without the combination of the PBC and UGC. YouTube’s popularity relies in part on the recirculation of mainstream media (Hilderbrand, 2007). YouTube has not only created a space where people can engage with a wide variety of content, but it has altered the way that consumers engage with television programs. With the availability of clips, consumers may use YouTube as a stepping stone to accessing mainstream media (Kim, 2012).

Broadcast Strategies in the Post-Network Era:

To better understand the ways in which digital media has impacted broadcast television, we must understand the history behind the production, distribution, and consumption of broadcast television. There have been three definitive eras of television since the technology was founded in the 1950s. In their contribution to *Television as Digital Media*, Roberta Pearson labels these eras as TVI, TVII, and TVIII, where each era is defined by the network structure and media spreadability. The first era, TVI, ranges from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s and is the time when the television industry functioned as three-network hegemony and there was a scarcity in channel offerings. Then follows TVII, which ranges from the early 1980s to the late 1990s and is described as the time when the industry experienced channel and network expansion and the beginning of network branding strategies. The final era follows and it is where the industry

stands today, with digital distribution platforms and increasing audience fragmentation (Pearson, 2014). As described in the quote from Pearson, the major shifts that have occurred throughout television history have occurred from the introduction of new technologies that have increased television accessibility and audience control. In the preliminary years of the television industry, three big networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC) had complete power over the industry. They were the deciders of content distribution and defined the relationship between studios and networks. They also influenced the broadcast schedule in relation to advertising models. Broadcast television networks would sell commercial slots to advertising agencies, which are dictated by the show and airdate (Bollapragada & Garbiras, 2004). This scheduling is a major determinant of linear broadcast scheduling and is another area in which broadcast networks have control over the television industry. This dictatorship left little room for negotiations with smaller production companies, leaving them at a disadvantage (Lotz, 2014). It wasn't until viewers and audience members gained more control that the power of the big three networks began to shift. The VCR was the first technology that challenged the established network systems as it allowed viewers to record programs to view at a later time, negating the linear program schedules set in place by the networks (Lotz, 2014). This shift in how viewers watched television continued to evolve as new technologies, such as the DVR and Out-Of-Home technologies, matured. This major shift was reflected at the 2006 International Broadcast Convention, the world's second-largest broadcasting trade show, when the convention decided to drop any mention of "broadcasting" in their organization's name and event and rebranded to the acronym "IBC" (Boddy, 2011). This symbolized broadcasting being revoked as the singular medium of distribution.

As methods of distribution have evolved, networks have had to shift their strategies for generating revenue. Though there has been speculation that the introduction of the internet and

digital distribution platforms has been detrimental to the television industry, the innovation of the networks has proven that these technological advancements have not been disruptive as much as they have been advantageous. Now more than ever, people are watching. As previously mentioned, the audience is more captivated than ever before. Now, not only do audiences have an abundance of options, but networks also have an abundance of opportunities available. As Jeffrey P. Jones puts it, "the network is no longer a company whose primary function is to produce content but, rather, one that is capable of locating very particular audiences across an array of media and engaging them with a set of experiences and relationships to capture and hold their attention while measuring their behaviors" (2010, p.23). In Jones's statement, they acknowledge not only the multitude of engagement opportunities for the network and their audience but also how many of those new technologies allow networks to measure their audience's behaviors. Through data collected on digital media, distributors are able to target audiences based on more specific individual traits of a person based on their media activities, rather than just the broad generalizations that used to have to be made about consumers (Boddy, 2011). The combination of being able to target audience members and distribute content over a wide variety of methods aided networks in finding opportunities for revenue outside of the traditional broadcasting space. Revenue opportunities through YouTube mirror those of the broadcasting medium as the networks are able to capitalize on advertising revenue (Kim, 2012). Overall, this reflects how the last wave of technological advancements has opened up doors for networks that were not there before.

Late-Night Television Distribution Strategies on YouTube

Distributing television content on digital platforms looks different depending on the genre of the television show and the content style in which networks choose to distribute their

show. Many scholars have found that the most successful television genre in the digital environment has been talk shows, more specifically, late-night television (Jones, 2010; Lotz, 2014; McNutt, 2017). There are a handful of ways in which the YouTube environment has been a successful endeavor for late-night television, from the natural genre segmentation, opportunities for promotion, and the heightened celebrity persona for late-night hosts.

The structure of late-night television has historically followed a more segmented episode style, with the combination of monologues, sketches, musical performances, and other miscellaneous segments. Because of this segmented episode style, late-night TV has a natural advantage when it comes to digital distribution methods. The nonlinear programming style of late-night makes dividing clips of the show to distribute onto YouTube video a more seamless process (Jones 2010; McNutt, 2017; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz et al., 2016). Additionally, the style of the segments presented on late-night TV has similar elements to popular YouTube videos. One of the key values of YouTube creators is collaboration. When late-night hosts invite their guests to participate in the sketches on their show, it has a similar collaboration style to that of YouTube creators. An example of this is James Corden's segment "Carpool Karaoke." The storyline of this segment is that James Corden is running late to work, and he invites his guests into his car so that he can use the carpool lane for a faster commute. The passenger, who is usually a musician, joins Corden as they sing music (often the music of the guest), Corden interviews them, and occasionally the sketch will carry on outside of the car; for example, Corden may take them to pick up coffee (McNutt, 2017). This sketch has a few elements that encompass the qualities of YouTube videos. There is first, the collaboration element as Corden welcomes celebrity guests to participate in the sketch. Another key element is the authenticity that is unique to the YouTube creative environment. Corden inviting the audience into the more intimate setting of his car,

rather than the typical late-night studio, breaks the barriers of traditional broadcasting elements.

“Carpool Karaoke” is one of the late-night segments that has seen major success on YouTube and it can largely be attributed to the organic ability of late-night television to conform to the digital media environment.

With the transition of late-night television to YouTube being so smooth, the process has reaped many benefits for late-night networks. Most notably is the opportunity for promotion. In their analysis of the benefits of YouTube distribution, Kim states that "for major content providers, including broadcasting networks, video sharing sites function as a promotion tool, and for advertising companies, online video services open up valuable new ad revenue" (2012, p.65). The strategy behind collaboration for YouTube creators is to cross-promote their channel to their collaborator's channel and vice versa. The same can be said about the late-night YouTube channels. Continuing with the example of Carpool Karaoke, when a consumer searches the musical guest that Corden has hosted on the segment into the YouTube search bar, they will find the sketch of that guest on Corden's show. From there, the YouTube algorithm may present them with more content from Corden's show, catching that consumer's attention. In the highly saturated media environment that has developed in the digital media age, it is the network's top priority to catch viewers' attention in any way that they can (Boddy, 2011).

Another promotional advantage that comes with distributing late-night TV on YouTube is the heightened celebrity persona for hosts. An important element to late-night TV has always been the personality of the hosts. McNutt argues that "As social media becomes a more dominant presence in media industries, late-night hosts are now extending their personas across multiple platforms" (2017). Additionally, as the platform has matured, many successful YouTube creators have grown to be considered celebrities in their own way. Presenting late-night hosts in a similar

way as YouTube creators aids in building a following for that host, drawing more consumers to the late-night show.

Literature Review Conclusion

With all the technological advancements that have occurred in the last few decades, many were skeptical that this would mean the end of the long-loved ritual of television watching. Amanda Lotz argued that this perspective is “simply our imagination of the future being tainted by knowledge of the past” (2014, p.69). After examining the dynamic of these changes, it is clear that these changes have not meant the end of television but rather the growth of television in a digital space. Audience members have gained more power in the media environment and the opportunities for creators have inflated, pushing the broadcast networks to find new and innovative ways to uphold the traditions of television. With the ease of digital distribution platforms such as YouTube and the many benefits that may be gained through digital distribution strategies, it is evident that if the broadcast networks put the audience members first, they will be able to foster better relationships with their consumers and achieve their goals through new and modern means.

Methodology

As the literature review demonstrates, digital media has had an impact on the television industry by way of content, distribution, and audience engagement strategies. As digital media continues to develop, it is important for the television industry to remain knowledgeable on how the changes occurring in the digital media space will influence their strategies, as historical broadcast methods are growing less sustainable for broadcast networks. To get a better understanding of how television studios have adapted to the new digital environment, this study more closely examines the late-night classic, *The Tonight Show*. Running from the 1950s to

today, *The Tonight Show* has prevailed through the many different eras of the television industry. This show was chosen for this study due to its long-standing prominence in late-night television.

The first portion of this research is a comparative analysis between the show when Johnny Carson hosted it in the 1970s to the show today, with host Jimmy Fallon. Five episodes from each program were selected for observation through a critical lens. For *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, there were only select episodes available to watch for this study. At the time of this research, there were not any full length episodes available through any streaming platform, so for the purposes of this study, individual episodes ranging from years 1971 to 1976 were purchased through Amazon Prime Video. Given the limited options available to observe, the episodes were chosen based on their availability, as there was only one available for purchase for each of those years. Each episode of *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* that was available for purchase had been edited since the original broadcast and there were unclear portions of the episodes unavailable for observation, which stands as a limitation of this research. Where the entirety of the episode was available to stream for Fallon's program, it was clear that portions of Carson's episodes had been cut, like transitions from guest to guest or the signoff at the end of the program. As a result, the episodes for Carson averaged at about 30 minutes, where the episodes from Fallon's era all fell around the 40-minute mark.

For *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon, the two most recent seasons were available for streaming on NBC's streaming platform *Peacock*. Between the two seasons available on *Peacock* at the time of this study, there were a total of 190 episodes available for observation. A random number generator was used to select episodes for the study. Due to the accessibility of Carson's programming as well as time constraints, five episodes were examined alongside the specified parameters of this research.

When considering the genre of late-night television, there are key components that set this television style apart from other content. The key components in late-night programming are the personality of the host, the guests invited to the show, and the segmented organization of each episode. With the goal of understanding the similarities and differences between the historical Tonight Show to today’s, this study looks at these two programs under parameters with these key components in mind.

After the episodes were selected for each program, the observations from each episode were collected in a spreadsheet. This spreadsheet consisted of six columns including the date the episode aired, notes on the personality of the host, the guests invited on the show, the dynamic between the guests and the host, the number of and style of the segments on each episode, and observations on audience engagement and interaction. A summary of these observations were then compiled into a table, which is included below as Table 1: *The Tonight Show*

Observations. These observations were then utilized to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between these two programs. The comparative analysis between these programs provided insight into how the late-night show has changed from historical programming to programming today.

Table 1

The Tonight Show Observations

<i>The Tonight Show Observations</i>		
	Johnny Carson (Observed 1971-1976)	Jimmy Fallon (Observed 2021-2022)
Personality of Host	Personable, Easygoing, Neighborly, Charming	Personable, Energetic, Theatrically Talented
Guest Occupations	Actors, Athletes, Musicians, Comedians, Political Figures	Actors, Athletes, Musicians, Comedians, Political Figures,

		Content Creators
Guest Interactions	1:1 with Carson	Major focus on promoting guest's work
		1:1 Conversations + Additional Segment with Fallon (& sometime's other guests)
Format of show	Intro & Monologue from Carson → Guest Interviews → Musical or Comedian Feature	Intro & Monologue from Fallon → Guest Interviews & Comedic Segments → Musical or Comedian Feature
Number of Segments	Avg. 3 - 5	Avg. 6 - 7
Style of Segments	Occasional Blue Notes Segment, Couch/Desk Conversations Between Guests & Carson	Florida News Roulette, Thank You Notes, #Hashtags, Fast Dance-Off, Search Party, Couch/Desk Conversations Between Guests & Fallon,
Advertising Methods	Direct product promotion through Carson	No direct product promotion outside of Guest's promotional initiative
Audience Engagement	Blue Notes Segment	Fallon's Summer Reads, #Hashtags

In addition to the comparative study done on Johnny Carson’s and Jimmy Fallon’s programs, this study takes a further look into digital media’s influence on the shift in television strategies by consulting *The Tonight Show*’s YouTube channel. As determined during the early process of this research, YouTube is one of the largest digital distribution opportunities for television networks. The methods used by television networks to distribute their content on these platforms is a crucial part of television strategies today as digital media continues to gain control over media consumption behaviors.

To understand the digital distribution methods behind *The Tonight Show*, this study observed the YouTube videos on their channel that coincide with the episodes used in the comparative study. The observations were collected in a spreadsheet with columns noting the episode date, video title, length of videos, and a number of views, whether the episode is a direct

copy of what was on the original broadcast or if the content was formatted differently, and if there was any new content on the YouTube channel that was not included in the original broadcast. A summarization of these observations is included below in Table 2: *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* Youtube Channel Observations. These observations were then used to determine the methods used by *The Tonight Show* to distribute in the digital space and the advantages of those strategies.

Table 2

The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon Youtube Channel Observations

<i>The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon</i> YouTube Observations					
Episode Season, Number, & Date	S8 EP182, 8/17/2021	S9 EP72, 01/21/2022	S8 EP195, 09/15/2022	S9 EP62 - 01/07/2022	S8 EP172 - 07/19/2021
Number of YouTube Videos	8	6	5	6	7
Avg. Length of Videos	4:16 Mins	5:16 Mins	7:26 Mins	7:50 Mins	4:97 Mins
Avg. Number of Views (As of March 18th, 2022)	124k Views	190k Views	337 Views	280k Views	227k Views
Copied from show?	7/8 clips directly pulled from Broadcast	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Any new content not shown on Broadcast?	1 New Clip ("That's Hot")	No	No	2 Extended Versions	No

Comparative Analysis: Johnny Carson to Jimmy Fallon

Personality of Host

Built within the title of the show, the host on a late-night program is a key aspect of each show. Often someone who is energetic and comedic, the personality of a host can be a huge draw for loyal viewership for shows like *The Tonight Show*. The first late-night host to garner a loyal following was one of the show's first hosts, Johnny Carson. Although Johnny was the third personality to host *The Tonight Show*, he was the first person to grow the show into a great success. With a 30 year run as host, Carson earned the title of the “King of Late Night.” When watching Carson’s program, it was clear that above all else, he was a charming man. He would tell jokes throughout the episode and have the occasional banter with his right-hand man and announcer, Ed McMahon. There was an easygoingness to Carson that led America to fall in love with him. An example of Carson’s charming character is in the episode observed from 1975, a woman named Maude Tull was a guest on the show. Maude Tull is a non-celebrity guest who was welcomed onto the show because she had recently been featured in the paper for just passing her driver’s license exam, at 103 years of age. Carson was incredibly attentive and hospitable to the sweet old woman, displaying the heartwarming nature of his personality (NBC, 1975).

This air of ease, however, is almost a direct contrast to today’s host Jimmy Fallon. Jimmy Fallon does have a certain charm to him, but it is derived from his heightened energy and quirky talents. Jimmy started his career as an actor and comedian before landing the role of *The Tonight Show* host, and his talents are a major part of his personality as host. An example of this is when Fallon participates in comedic segments on his show. In Episode 195 of Season 8, which aired on September 15th, 2022, Fallon and guest JoJo Siwa played a game together called the “Fast Dance Off” (Cestaro et al., 2021b). The premise of this game was that Fallon and Siwa would take turns dancing as fast as they possibly could on a lit-up dance floor. The catch of the game is that the songs that were randomly selected for this dance-off were all slow and dramatic

songs. This segment was entertaining because, with Siwa's dance background and Fallon's over-the-top energy, they both put their all out on that dance floor. Fallon is committed to the bit, dancing so hard he was out of breath for the conversation with Siwa that followed the segment. This energy from Fallon, met with his theatrical abilities, sets him apart as a late-night host from past hosts. Carson, on the other hand, had a much more relaxed persona and did not engage in over-the-top theatrics, like the "Fast Dance-Off", during his run on the show.

Despite the many things that set Carson and Fallon apart from one another, there are also similarities that have prevailed through Tonight Show hosts throughout the years. The primary one is that they are both very personable. Carson and Fallon showed incredible attention to their guests and would emulate a relationship with each one as if they had known each other for years (for some of the guests, this was actually the case.) This personability looked like asking after their relatives, celebrating both their personal and professional successes and commemorating old memories together. This brought on an intimate dynamic to the show, as it often felt like the audience was sitting in on a conversation between two friends. This intimacy is one of the major draws to talk shows because people get to see a different side of the celebrity guests. The personality of the host is imperative in establishing a dynamic relationship with guests and is something that Carson and Fallon both did with ease.

Guest Appearances

With the rise of digital media, there has been a shift in the definition of celebrity as people have the ability to find fame from their bedroom using only their camera for content production and distribution. Throughout this study, one of the parameters used for analyzing *The Tonight Show* over the years was the roster of guests that were hosted on the show. During Johnny Carson's run, the guests were primarily actors, athletes, musicians, comedians, he even

hosted John Lindsay, former Mayor of New York City. Jimmy Fallon had a similar range of guests but also hosted people whose primary source of fame was through social media and the internet. An example of this is Fallon's guest JoJo Siwa. Although Siwa's first media appearances began on a television show, Lifetime reality show "Dance Moms," Siwa's fame is primarily derived from her presence on YouTube. After she gained a large following and built a substantial platform on YouTube, Siwa went on to tour as a performer and made appearances on other television shows such as "The Masked Singer" and "Dancing with the Stars" ("JoJo Siwa", n.d.). Siwa's appearance on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* stands as an example of how digital media has opened doors for who achieves the status of celebrity and the types of people that audience members are looking for. While Carson's guests were those who only achieved fame through traditional definitions of fame, Fallon's guest list itself relates to Napoli's (2010) idea of who achieves fame in the digital age.

One thing that is made explicitly clear on Fallon's show is that each guest is there because they have a major event happening in their career around the time of their appearance. Every guest that was hosted had an upcoming release of a movie or show, a new launch in their brand, an upcoming tour, etc. The show has become a standard publicity platform for guests to promote their recent projects. Fallon often directly acknowledges the publicity agenda. For example, in an interview with actor Michael Shannon, Fallon explains the premise of Shannon's upcoming television show, *Nine Perfect Strangers*, to the audience before turning to Shannon and asking "Did I set it up?", making sure he did a proper job at promoting the material that was Shannon's reason for being on the show (Cestaro et al., 2021a). In addition to the conversations advertising the guests' work, a promotional clip of their upcoming work was included in the program for every single guest that appeared on Fallon's show. The promotional opportunities

for the guests were not as obviously addressed during Johnny Carson's program, as the guests were more casually welcomed as acquaintances of Carson's.

Content Segmentation

The formatting of the show has followed the same generic style from Carson's run to Fallon's. The show always begins with an introductory montage of scenes from New York City, accompanied by big band music, before cutting to the studio where the host is announced in front of the live studio audience. The host then always kicks off the show with a monologue, before each guest is welcomed on the show for their separate conversations. The ending segment of each show is most often a performance from a musical guest, or occasionally a stand-up bit from a comedian. Where this same overarching pattern remained through the years, the amount of content built within the framework increased significantly, resulting in a more segmented show style.

Beginning with the opening monologue, Fallon jumped from topic to topic within his monologue much quicker than Carson. Where Carson would touch on approximately 3 or 4 topics each night in his monologue, Fallon averaged about 8 or 9 topic changes within the same 5-10 minute time frame. This fast-paced flow mirrors the way that Fallon's episode incorporated many additional segments beyond what was presented on Carson's program. The heightened number of segments on Fallon's show versus Carson's is also indicative of the shortened media trends seen as social media has reduced consumers' attention spans, which Boddy (2011) implies is due to the oversaturation of content available to consumers.

Following the monologue, the host would move over to the iconic Tonight Show desk and couches where they would remain for a majority of the rest of the program. Occasionally, Carson would engage in an activity called "Blue Cards", where he would answer a handful of

questions from studio audience members. Sometimes, however, this segment was skipped entirely and Carson would converse with the show's announcer, Ed McMahon, or the bandleader Doc Severinsen, or they would jump right into guest interviews. In contrast, Fallon always did some sort of segment following his monologue before bringing guests into the program. There was a wide range of segments included in the program, such as the Thank You Note Writing, Hashtags, or Florida News Roulette. This part of the program was where the audience was able to observe the host as a solo entertainer in addition to the monologue. Fallon's consistency with solo segments following his monologue further contributed to his established personality as a theatrical host.

Following the introductory segments, the hosts would invite the guests out for their interviews. During Carson's programming, this would always look like a sit-down, casual conversation between the guest and Carson. Carson would occasionally present printed photographs of his guests that the camera would zoom into, which was the extent of any additional media incorporated into the program. On the other hand, Fallon's guests would not only sit down and have a casual conversation with Fallon, they would also usually participate in some sort of game or activity, like the previously mentioned "Fast Dance Off." These segments, always ranging in the 5-7 minute time range, were always highly comedic and endorsed the high-energy theatrics that coincides with Fallon's personality as a host.

These segments also stood as an opportunity for guests to interact with one another. Where in Johnny Carson's program, there would occasionally be multiple guests sitting on the couch talking to Johnny at one time, the interaction between guests was not very prominent. Occasionally, Fallon brought multiple guests from one episode onto the stage at the same time to play a game that may require more participants. An example of this is when Fallon hosted the

cast of *Queer Eye*. Hosting the cast of a show already brings a larger crowd of guests onto the stage than the typical one guest at a time, but Fallon took advantage of the larger number of guests by inviting on JB Smoove - actor, comedian, and the other guest for that night's episode - onto the stage to play a game of "Search Party", a "family feud" style game (Love & Mitchell, 2022). The decision to invite multiple guests to play a segment at one time shows another side of the guests to the audience as they are no longer just watching Fallon's interactions with guests, but they can see the guests interacting with one another, enhancing the voyeur-like look into celebrities' personalities that audience members get on late-night programs, which is also a common characteristic of celebrity publicity in the digital media space.

Advertising is a dominant factor in how television show strategizes their programming. Upon observation, the way that advertising is implemented in Carson's show versus Fallon's was notably different. Advertising has always been a significant strategic factor in television. With the linear broadcast system being formulated around advertising slots, advertising has always been a prominent way for networks to generate revenue. Throughout *The Tonight Show* program, Johnny Carson would himself pause the flow of the program to advertise a product. Occasionally after his monologue, or even once during the middle of a conversation with a guest, Carson grabbed a sample of the product from a production crew member or from behind his desk to hold it up to the audience and speak the short, scripted advertisement. This direct advertising is not something that was observed on Fallon's program. This could be due to a multitude of factors, including an increased finesse in advertisements as media technology has advanced, as well as the additional opportunities for ad-generated revenue available to television networks through digital media. The differences in advertising are reflective of how television strategies have changed from the original broadcast era of television to today's world of digital media.

Audience Engagement

Perhaps the most notable difference between *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson and Jimmy Fallon was the opportunities for audience engagement. The ability for audience members to engage beyond the walls of the studio has increased rapidly in the world of digital media. Audience members have gone from being passive consumers to being active participants. The most explicit example of the comparison of the Blue Cards segment to the Hashtags segment. On Carson's show, audience members occasionally had the opportunity to write their questions for Carson out on a blue card, then Carson read and responded to a select few following his monologue. This segment usually allowed Carson to interact personally with the audience members he was responding to and engage them more directly.

Fallon's segment "Hashtags" follows a similar read-and-respond style to it, however, participation is not limited to the live studio audience members. In the Hashtags segment, Fallon tweets out a topic for people to respond to using that week's hashtag. On Episode 182 of Season 8, Fallon asked viewers to respond to the topic describing their summer vacation in six words using the hashtag #MySummerInSixWords. During the episode, Fallon read out a few of his favorite responses to that week's prompt, including the responder's Twitter handle and picture (Cestaro et al., 2021a). The utilization of social media for this segment allowed people from all over the world to participate in one of Fallon's infamous segments, and also encouraged audience members to pursue interaction with *The Tonight Show* media outlets outside of the live broadcast, opening the doors for cross-promotion for *The Tonight Show*'s digital media platforms.

Comparative Analysis Conclusion

The Tonight Show has seen six different hosts over the last several decades, and, as shown by this analysis, the personality and style of the host often correspond closely with the formatting and style of the show during their run. Johnny Carson, hailing from the Midwest, graced *The Tonight Show* with an air of hospitality and charm that welcomed a loyal following for him as host, securing him a 30-year run in the position. The Carson Era is when the format of the show, from monologue to guest conversations to musical performances, was solidified and set the foundation for future hosts. This structure has been maintained up to the current host of Jimmy Fallon, though the quantity of content fit into the framework has risen as media consumption strategies have increased. The broader range of guests invited on the show, the number and style of segments, and the increased audience engagement methods are all characteristics of the show that have seen drastic change in the digital age. The implications of digital media in these strategic changes are explored further in the next step of this study.

Content Analysis: The Tonight Show YouTube Channel

With a deeper insight into how *The Tonight Show* has changed from its earliest seasons to today, it is important to understand the how and why. As stated both in the literature review and throughout this research, digital media has had a major influence on how television networks formulate their content and strategize their distribution. Not only has *The Tonight Show* remained a success over time, but it has also gained a strong footing in the digital media space. With over 29 million subscribers, *The Tonight Show* YouTube channel is one of the primary viewing avenues for the show's audience today (McNutt, 2017). For the purposes of further understanding the role that digital media plays in television strategies today, this study took a further look at the content distributed to *The Tonight Show's* YouTube channel.

An important thing to note about *The Tonight Show*'s YouTube channel is that there is content from episodes going all the way back to 2012. However, the earliest full episode available to observe on the NBC website and streaming platform was only 5 months before the start of this study. This goes to show that not only does YouTube function as a distribution platform for the content of *The Tonight Show*, this platform acts as an archive of their old content, as any content produced before September 2021 is not accessible anywhere but YouTube.

Similarly to the broadcast space, YouTube is a place for television networks to generate ad revenue. Played before, and sometimes during, YouTube videos, advertisements on YouTube benefit content creators in conjunction with the low cost of publishing content onto the platform. Revenue generated per YouTube video is a calculated amount allotted for every 1,000 views. Of the YouTube videos observed for this study, the lowest view count observed was 32,000, and the highest was 778,000 (YouTube, n.d). These numbers indicate that *The Tonight Show* is able to profit greatly off of its distribution on YouTube. Another benefit to using YouTube as a distribution platform is the opportunities for cross-promotion. Underneath every single video on *The Tonight Show*'s channel is a list of links with information on where to watch full episodes, the NBC website, *The Tonight Show*'s social media platforms, as well as the links to Jimmy Fallon's social media accounts. Having these links immediately available to the millions of people who view their content is a valuable way to encourage further engagement with their audience members, which in turn benefits the content of their show for series like "Hashtag."

The segmented nature of *The Tonight Show* allows for a smooth transition into the YouTube platform. *The Tonight Show* YouTube channel contains almost entire episodes of the show, split into several smaller videos. For each episode chosen for this study, there ranged

anywhere from 5 to 8 coinciding YouTube videos. Of the total 32 videos observed for this study, only 3 contained content that differed from the original program. An observation that was collected during the first portion of this study was that in addition to the announcer introducing all of the guests during the introduction of the show, Fallon reintroduced each guest every time they came on stage. While this may have seemed slightly repetitive in the full broadcast episode, this format was beneficial for the dissemination of the content for individual YouTube clips.

An additional observation was that the YouTube videos were all posted on the same date that the episode aired. These two observations prove a level of efficiency within *The Tonight Show's* strategies, as they are readily able to separate their content to be posted within hours of the original show. This also allows *The Tonight Show* to imitate the same broadcast schedule that their show functions on on their digital platforms.

Two of the YouTube videos that differed from the original program were not entirely new content, but rather extensions of what was on the episode available for streaming. For example, when Fallon hosted JB Smoove on the show, the interview portion of his appearance was approximately six minutes long. However, on YouTube, the video with his interview was actually 12 minutes long. The extended version contained their complete conversation, whereas the shortened version contained the most important parts, like the parts where they discuss Smoove's upcoming appearance in the major motion picture, "Spider-Man: No Way Home" (The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, 2022f). The other YouTube video that was not a direct copy from the show was entirely new content made by Jimmy Fallon and guest Paris Hilton. The video, titled "That's Hot with Paris Hilton | The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon," was only 24 seconds long, and it was a brief comedic conversation between Fallon and Hilton, playing on Hilton's famous tagline "That's Hot" (The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, 2021i). An

observation made about this video was also that the setup for this segment did not require any additional production materials, due to it being primarily a short discussion between Hilton and Fallon. The low-level production requirements and short length of this video suggest that it was not a major cost for *The Tonight Show* to make. As of March 17th, 2022, this video received 64,791 views, making it a cost-efficient way to get more ratings and publicity, in addition to an additional source to generate ad revenue, while providing their audience with more YouTube exclusive content.

Summary & Conclusion

Beginning with a review of where the television industry has seen shifts from its conception in the mid-20th Century to today's digital era, this study demonstrated the specific ways in which late-night television has garnered its strengths to conquer the digital space. *The Tonight Show*, a long time American favorite, has embraced the shifted dynamics of development, production, distribution, and consumption. *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* established a framework that would lay the groundwork for the advancements made as digital media was introduced. Carson's charming personality as host established qualities of personability that would later become valuable qualities in digital media creators. Fallon's personality embodies these qualities and enhances them with his high-energy talents that have kept him relevant amongst the highly-saturated user-generated content environment. Furthermore, the neighborly dynamic established with the guests welcomed onto the show during Carson's era were more deeply developed by the comedic skits incorporated into the guest appearances on Fallon's program. With the enhanced ability for audience engagement, publicity opportunities for the host and guests, and the multi-platform accessibility, *The Tonight Show* has

advanced their program as digital media became a primary tool for engagement and they have been able to gear their program geared towards a vast array of audiences. Jimmy Fallon's personality and style as host incorporates the fast-paced movement and high energy levels that are common in social media content creators today. In conjunction with the seamless ability of *The Tonight Show* to distribute their content digitally due to the formatting of their content, *The Tonight Show* has created a method that has proved to be sustainable in the digital media space.

There are a few limitations of this research, the primary one being the inaccessibility of linear broadcast content for old episodes. Since this research's completion, several full episodes of *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* became available to stream on NBC's streaming service *Peacock*. For further study, the availability of these episodes on this platform creates a larger pool of content that can be studied to evaluate the historical methods of the television show. In a similar vein, another limitation is that *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* only has full episodes available to stream going back as far as March, 2021, a full year before the time of this study. The show airs every weeknight, so there are hundreds of episodes available to view within that time frame, but it still stands as a limitation as this study was able to observe content from the Johnny Carson era over a span of 5 years.

The realm of digital media grows everyday as more social platforms and technologies are introduced. YouTube has grown as an indispensable platform for late-night programs, and similar strategies have begun to expand onto other social platforms. In the last handful of years, platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have gained a large popularity within the entertainment industry and many television networks have incorporated these platforms into their digital marketing strategies. This was seen even during this study as Fallon used twitter for multiple segments on his programs, such as “#Hashtags” or “Fallon's Summer Reads.”

Further research within this specific phenomenon might examine the use of these platforms and the implications they have on the writing, producing, and distribution of late-night television. As an example, it would be interesting to see how *The Tonight Show* utilizes trends on TikTok to promote their content, and whether that content receives more audience engagement than their long-time established YouTube channel. Further research such as this is imperative to the future of the industry as digital media continues to expand into aspects of everyday life. For *The Tonight Show* to continue to remain successful in the coming years, it is vital that they stay knowledgeable in the trends in digital distribution and find ways to maintain the attention of consumers as the digital media space becomes more highly saturated everyday.

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