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Pursuing “Generation Snowflake”: *Mr. Robot* and the USA Network’s Mission for Millennials

In their responses to the first season of *Mr. Robot* (2015-present), journalists identified the drama series as being highly uncharacteristic of the USA Network, the basic cable channel that commissioned it. *Uproxx*’s Brian Grubb (2015), for example, had anticipated, on the basis of USA’s programming track record through much of the 21st century, that *Mr. Robot* might be fun, light-hearted, and sun-drenched. Yet he found the series, which centres on troubled computer-hacker Elliot Alderson’s efforts to collapse the global economy, to be a dark drama representing a “hard left turn from the types of show USA has become known for.” *Inverse*’s Eric Francisco (2016) and *Advertising Age*’s Anthony Crupi (2015a) each echoed this view of the series. The former observed how, with *Mr. Robot*, “USA’s sunny skies have gotten a little gray”; the latter suggested that the series is “darker and knottier than the jokey, genial... dramas that once were the network’s stock-in-trade.” For commentators on the US television industry, then, *Mr. Robot* marked a clear change in USA’s scripted programming strategy.

Why, then, did USA transition from being a channel well known for its bright “escapist fantasies” (Ryan 2009) to commissioning a series labeled by critics as “powerfully sad” (McCown 2015) and infused with “melancholy beauty” (Nussbaum 2015)? This article argues that this shift in USA policy is exemplary of a broader industrial pattern, emergent in recent years, of basic cable channels reconfiguring brand identities in light of the increased industrial significance of millennials. Various

cable channels have reshaped their brand images in light of the millennial generation becoming an increasingly vital target demographic group for the industry.¹ The USA Network, along with other established cable channels, such as AMC (Poggi, 2015) and TBS (Zarum, 2016), has evolved its branding strategies – in terms of promotion and original programming – so as to appeal to this audience specifically. This altered context has furthermore motivated the launch of new cable channels, such as Fusion, FXX and Revolt TV, which have been specifically created to attract millennials (Fernandez, 2013). This decade has therefore witnessed a significant pivot from part of the cable sector towards this demographic group.

Using the case of USA and *Mr. Robot*, this article demonstrates how these channel-rebranding processes can influence institutional approaches to basic cable scripted programming. It shows how narrative elements of *Mr. Robot*, including character, story themes and visual style, have been tailored to appeal to millennials. It furthermore demonstrates how USA configured its promotional strategy for the series to complement the channel's audience-targeting priority. The article reveals, in particular, how widespread conceptualisations of millennials within the media industries have influenced USA's development and marketing of *Mr. Robot*. As Serazio (2015) demonstrates, media industries do not merely understand millennials to be a particular age group but as a generation with an identifiable set of tastes and behaviours that are distinctive from other age segments.² The article shows how discursive constructions of millennial cultural identity that emerge from this mind set – the millennial as tech-savvy “digital native” and vulnerable “snowflake,” for example – have fed into USA's practices. It furthermore demonstrates how the USA

Network, via this process, reinforces these pre-existing stereotypes within the content it disseminates.

This study operates within a field of scholarship that traces the connections between basic-cable scripted programming, audience targeting and the formation of channel identities, i.e. brands. This area of research shows how basic cable channels have conceived of signature programming as a means to help form distinctive brand profiles so as to distinguish their services within the context of an intensely competitive sector.³ It furthermore demonstrates that such scripted programming and resultant brand identities are, within this highly fragmented market, configured to appeal to specific demographic groups.⁴ This article makes an original contribution to this field by ascertaining, via its study of *Mr. Robot* and the USA Network, the ways in which the increased importance of millennials is uniquely informing channels' practices concerning scripted programming.

The USA Network is an appropriate case study to consider this wider prioritisation of millennials within basic cable, along with its influence upon the development and promotion of scripted programming. This is due to the channel's high cultural importance to the sector and wider US entertainment media industries. In terms of its audience reach, USA has consistently surpassed its direct competitors throughout much of this century, serving as the nation's most watched basic cable entertainment channel from 2006 until 2015 (Kissell 2015a). In economic terms, the NBCUniversal-owned USA Network has served, along with its sibling basic cable channels Syfy and Bravo, as the most profitable component of the NBCUniversal

media conglomerate structure (Holt 2011, 171). The way in which this industrially significant channel has responded to changing audience contexts is therefore a useful indicator of broader practices within the basic cable sector. To appropriately contextualise this study the following section outlines the adverse industrial conditions within basic cable that have led the USA Network, as well as other basic cable channels, to make the targeting of millennials a priority in the 2010s. More specifically, it establishes the contexts in the mid-2010s that underpinned the initial development and marketing of *Mr. Robot*.

Rise of the cordless: Basic cable's changing contexts

In the mid-2010s, despite its continued ability to outperform rival entertainment cable channels in terms of overall ratings, the USA Network proved unable to buck a trend among established basic cable channels for declines in total numbers of viewers. The channel, more pertinently, struggled to avoid the sector-wide decline in viewers aged 18-49, which is the demographic of most value to advertisers (and therefore typically the most sought after audience by channels). USA audiences aged 18-49 declined 14 per cent in 2014 (Kissell 2015b), and a further 19 per cent in 2015 (Kissell 2015a). This performance mirrored wider ratings patterns within the sector at this time. In 2014, 14 out of those 20 basic cable channels most watched by viewers aged 18-49 saw a decline in that viewership by 5 per cent or more (Kissell, 2015b); in 2015, 15 out of the 20 channels most watched by that viewership were down 5 per cent in this key demographic (Kissell 2015a).

The apparent viewing behaviours of millennials, who now comprise the 18-34 demographic and furthermore represent the largest segment of viewers aged 18-49 (Adalian 2015), proved a key factor influencing these audience-rating declines. According to Nielsen figures, viewership of television by traditional means (network and cable) among viewers aged 18-34 fell from 21.7 million in 2011 to 17.8 million in 2015, a decline of approximately 20 per cent (Guion 2015). Millennials' viewing of Internet video streaming services appears to have driven this decline in programming consumption via traditional means among this demographic group. According to a 2014 comScore survey (Lunden 2014), 61 per cent of millennials utilised a paid digital video service such as Netflix or Hulu Plus, a higher percentage take up of such services compared to adoption by other demographic groups. As Nielsen research (Hagey and Vranica 2014) carried out in the same year suggests, this audience's utilisation of digital video streaming services resulted in a substantial reduction in their viewing of traditional television transmissions. This research shows that millennials, after signing up to such services, view (on average) 20 per cent less television by traditional means than they did previously.

One should be careful not to regard such commercially-produced audience research data as accurately reflecting the behaviours of the 18-35 demographic group as a whole. As Eileen Meehan argues, the audiences that Nielsen constructs via its data are "commodities – products designed to meet the demands of buyers" (2005, 117-18). Audience measurement methodologies are therefore, she contends, configured to meet the needs of networks and advertisers rather than fully reflect the actual audience (1993, 387). Regardless of how fully representative such viewing data are,

however, the notion that millennials have been turning away from basic cable is widely accepted within industrial culture. This type of data therefore diminishes channels' abilities to generate revenues on the basis of the audiences they attract.

The conditions in the mid-2010s, indicated by the above audience research, clearly gave strong economic incentive for all networks and cable services to develop the means to attract more millennials. For USA, however, the requirement to appeal to a younger adult audience became especially pressing. This is due to the channel's median audience age becoming reportedly higher than that of some of its rivals.

While the median viewer ages of FX and AMC in 2015 were measured as, respectively, 41 and 42 (Sternberg 2015), USA's median viewer age in the same year was gauged to be 54 (Crupi 2015b).⁵ This metric can be a significant factor in shaping advertisers' perceptions of a given channel (Sternberg). USA therefore had a strong motive to reduce its median viewer age closer to the 18-49 demographic so as to increase its attractiveness to advertisers.

This changing industrial context during the mid-2000s strongly informed *Mr. Robot's* conception and development. USA's commissioning of the series' pilot in the summer of 2014 occurred after the channel had already resolved some months previous to address its audience erosion by targeting millennials specifically (Adalian). USA executives have furthermore clearly indicated, via journalistic interviews, that *Mr. Robot* was intended to appeal to this audience (Adalian; Nededog 2015; Crupi 2015b). The following case study shows how *Mr. Robot's* first season, along with the methods that USA developed to promote it to viewers, were

intended to attract this demographic. It furthermore demonstrates how USA's perceptions regarding millennials' personalities and preferences shaped a strategy that clearly departed from the channel's prior approaches to programming development and promotion. In so doing it gives insight into precisely how television institutions' economically-driven pivot towards millennials is influencing approaches to scripted programming and brand identities. Focussing first on the series' textual features, the following section details how – with *Mr. Robot* – USA commissioned a series with narrative characteristics reflective of widespread assumptions about millennials' tastes and behaviours. It furthermore shows how this process resulted in a clean break from the channel's prior storytelling conventions. To this end, the section begins by establishing the narrative norms from which *Mr. Robot* broke.

Grey skies: *Mr. Robot*'s narrative features

In line with a broader trend this century of original programming underpinning basic cable channel branding, USA's drama commissions in the late-2000s and early-2010s proved integral to the channel's construction of a unique identity. The narrative characteristics identifiable in many USA series from this period strongly informed what became known within industrial and journalistic discourses as the channel's "blue skies" (Snierson 2009) brand image.⁶ Such series that contributed to this brand include *Suits* (2011-), *Psych* (2008-2014), *Burn Notice* (2007-2014), *White Collar* (2009-2014), *Common Law* (2012) and *Royal Pains* (2009-2016). From USA's perspective, the "blue skies" label has a figurative meaning relating to its commissioning aims during this period. That is, "blue skies" signifies what Bonnie Hammer, Chairman of NBCUniversal Cable, outlines as the channel's then aim of

prioritising “optimistic” (Chozick 2011) dramas with “aspirational, upbeat” lead characters “who... aren’t Debbie Downers” (Snierson 2009). While being “slightly flawed” these protagonists were, according to Hammer, nevertheless intended to be “likable” (Miller, 2011). In line with these aims, lead characters of USA’s “blue skies” series are typically classically handsome individuals replete with easy-going charm and confidence. Examples of such protagonists include *Royal Pains’* Hank Lawson, *Suits’* Harvey Specter and *White Collar’s* Neil Caffrey.

The “blue skies” label also has a related literal meaning, as it refers to USA executives’ previous insistence that narrative settings contain backdrops of vivid blue skies. This institutional mandate is evidenced by *Royal Pains’* Long Island ocean vistas, for example, as well as by *Burn Notice’s* brilliant Miami skylines. As *Royal Pains* writer Mike Rauch observes, the bright settings ensure “a buoyancy, a happiness in the atmosphere” (Hirsch). The environments therefore supported USA’s objective during this period to provide upbeat, optimistic narratives. This aim to privilege a bright aesthetic filters into other areas of visual style within “blue skies” series. The channel, for example, would instruct series producers to enliven any potentially dull settings, such as office and domestic interiors, with splashes of vivid colour (Chozick).

This approach to mise-en-scène is evident in the *White Collar* episode ‘All In’ (1:6), in which a medium shot frames Neal Caffrey and fellow conman Mozzie sitting together in an apartment upon a couch. Within the frame, to the side of the couch, an orange lampshade glows brightly, bringing vibrant colour to an interior shot

within an unremarkable apartment set. Such use of brightly coloured props within the background of interior shots is typical of visual style within USA's "blue skies" series. A further related technique within such series' interior-set shots is the use of windows within backdrops as a rationale to include a bright light. This approach is evident within *Suits* scenes set in Harvey Specter's corner office at his law firm. Tall windows span two adjoining sides of the set, with shots typically using one or both windowed sides as a backdrop to dialogue exchanges. Behind the set's windows there is typically a brightly lit mural of a Manhattan skyline, this set lighting ensuring that a gleaming white vibrancy often characterises the background to shots within this space.

USA Network drama series from the late-2000s and early 2010s can therefore be said to conform to two institutionally-enforced narrative conventions: 1) protagonists are typically positive, assured, having been engineered to convey optimism; and, 2) visual styles typically include vivid colour schemes and prioritise clean and aspirational backdrops (e.g. pristine, sun-drenched beaches and bright, welcoming interiors). The "blue skies" textual characteristics helped to establish the USA brand as optimistic, providing viewers, observes Hammer (Hirsch), with the "fun escapism" they desire. The dramas were therefore fundamental to, what a *Wall Street Journal* headline refers to as, the channel's "happy-time network" identity (Chozick). USA's prioritisation of millennials, combined with its perceptions concerning this audience, led to the channel departing from "blue skies" textual strategies and branding practices as part of its development of *Mr. Robot*.

Analysis of *Mr. Robot's* narrative features demonstrates this. For example, the character traits of Elliot Alderson, *Mr. Robot's* protagonist, are indicative of both the USA network's break from "blue skies" narrative convention and its move to appeal to millennials. Elliot appears configured as the sum total of the millennial personalities and behaviours that form within cultural discourses. He therefore appears intended to strongly resonate with the millennial audience member that media industries perceive. For example, as part of his study of how marketers target this generation, Serazio (607) identifies the marketing construction of a millennial as someone who is: A) "technologically intimate;" B) empowered by digital participatory culture; C) sceptical of traditional advertising; and, D) disengaged from "old" media platforms (e.g. film and broadcast). Elliot displays such characteristics throughout *Mr. Robot's* first season.

For instance, he typically achieves his objectives via a mastery of digital technology. That is, via his supreme hacking abilities, which he frequently deploys as part of his attacks on the E-Corp conglomerate, which he aims to destroy. Elliott is also shown to be hostile towards "old" media practices. For example, his own reimagining of an E-Corp commercial (within the pilot episode), which sees the conglomerate rebranded as "Evil Corp," implies that he regards conventional advertising forms as insincere. Elliot furthermore sneers at mass media forms, such as Hollywood blockbusters, declaring Marvel films as "stupid" and perceiving one character's preference for a *Transformers* movie as reason enough to dislike him.

Via Elliot's character traits, which echo a perception of millennials as strictly "new" media, *Mr. Robot* reinforces this stereotype of this generation's members being inextricably linked to digital technology. The case of *Mr. Robot* and the USA Network therefore shows how programming practices within the basic cable sector are not only underpinned by, but can also amplify, wider cultural assumptions concerning millennials' personalities.

Elliot's motivation for his hacking activities is another character trait that appears engineered to attract millennials' attention. This is because it has the potential to appeal to what media industries identify as millennials' heightened social consciences. This perception of millennials within media industries is evident within the comments of Linda Ong, chief culture officer of the marketing agency Civic Entertainment Group, which serves NBC, CNN and HBO, among other television brands. "Some of the basic underpinning of the millennial culture was that everybody got a trophy," and so members of this generation "were bought up valuing equality," she observes (Nededog, 2016). Accordingly, argues Ong, millennials prize entertainment programming that contains "social value" through its acknowledgement of societal problems. The key reason why Elliot – and the fsociety hacking contingent of which he is part – seeks to bring down E-Corp via hacking practices is to help eradicate global debt thereby achieving greater economic parity across society. Elliot's desire to ease the high levels of debt that citizens face complements media industries' understanding of millennials as a demographic group that places a high value on social equality. Through its creation of this drama protagonist engaged in efforts to secure economic parity across society, USA has

perpetuated this further millennial stereotype, activated by Ong's comments, of the millennial possessing a strong social conscience.

The particular topic of economic inequality and financial debt furthermore appears well placed to resonate, if not with millennials, then at least with the stereotyped millennial audience member that discursively forms within media culture. As millennials are a demographic group particularly prone to having sources of long-term debt, journalists (see, for example, Smith 2015; Lusardi 2015; Rebell 2016) typically emphasise this indebtedness as a core facet of millennials' identities. By making these themes central to the *Mr. Robot* season one narrative, the USA Network complemented its own aims to lure the hypothetical millennial audience member that circulates cultural discourse.

Elliot's fragile and depressed mental state, which typically serves as a narrative obstacle to the character, is a further and highly significant aspect of Elliot's personality that has been designed to appeal to millennials. From the USA Network's point of view, having a protagonist that consistently struggles to cope with mental health issues accords with, what the channel perceives as, the preferences of *Mr. Robot*'s target audience. This perspective is evident in the comments of USA Network President Chris McCumber (Adalian). "If you look at the entire audience [of millennials]," he observes, "they want to see... more characters that come from the real world and face real problems."

By including a mentally fragile protagonist, *Mr. Robot* clearly departs from USA's "blue skies" programming and branding strategies. It is true that Elliot shares similarities with "blue skies" protagonists in an important regard. That is, he is highly adept within a particular field of expertise. So, while *White Collar*'s Neil Caffrey is a gifted forger and conman, and *Suits*' Harvey Specter is an accomplished lawyer, Elliot is a supremely skilled hacker. Yet, despite his hacking abilities, Elliot lacks the cool, easy charm and self-assuredness of Caffrey, Specter *et al.* Instead he is socially dysfunctional, often appearing anxious, lonely and despondent. His emotional state is in part due to the fact that, in comparison to other USA drama protagonists, Elliot often appears less able to utilise his particular expertise as a means to exert control over rapidly unfolding story events.

While Elliot is clearly distinct from "blue skies" leads, due to his flawed personality, he shares closer resemblances with basic cable drama protagonists previously developed at rival channels. He specifically appears in some ways similar to "quality" drama protagonists that have emerged on other channels in the 21st century. Such protagonists include those of the two dramas that led AMC's tilt towards "quality" programming in the late 2000s (Jaramillo 2013; Smith 2013), namely *Mad Men* (2007-2015) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013); the former's lead protagonist, Don Draper, is a morally-ambiguous advertising creative, while the latter's, Walter White, is a murderous methamphetamine manufacturer. These characters' imperfect personalities complemented commissioning channel AMC's objective at that time to appeal to a narrow affluent audience who are understood to gravitate to morally complex characters. Similar to other cable drama "quality" protagonists, these

characters find themselves at various junctures in depressed and despondent states, a consequence of their dubious behaviours. Such behaviours include Don's alcoholism and marital infidelities, and Walter's hubristic and manipulative tendencies.

Crucially, however, "quality" protagonists such as White and Draper are typically shown to triumphantly take authority over unfolding narrative activity and ascend from their occasional ruts. However, reflecting an intention for Elliott to appeal to what USA understands as millennials' preference for vulnerable characters, Elliot is rarely seen to overcome his mental fragility. He is typically unable to beat his inner demons, and so his helplessness is far more sustained. This comparison indicates therefore that basic cable channels' pursuit of millennials can result in protagonists that are distinct not only from USA's confident "blue skies" leads but also from other enduring character archetypes within the sector.

USA's assumption that a mentally anguished and anxiety-ridden drama protagonist would be especially resonant to millennials aligns with wider understandings of members of this demographic group. As part of pervasive cultural discourses that disparage the demographic segment, Millennials are often perceived as delicate, anxiety-ridden and lacking in mental fortitude. These perceptions are exemplified by the insulting "generation snowflake" moniker that is frequently bestowed upon millennials (French 2016; Markowicz 2016; Rumbelow 2016). Via their commissioning of *Mr. Robot*, USA therefore facilitated a narrative that perpetuates a

further ubiquitous stereotype of this generation's members; that is, the millennial as a distressed, emotionally fragile figure.

The furthering of this "snowflake" stereotype within *Mr. Robot* occurs not only via Elliot's character properties but also through the visual presentation of Elliot, leading to a visual style that marks a break from USA's prior narrative conventions. The mise-en-scène in *Mr. Robot* has been engineered to reflect Elliot's unfortified emotional state so as to further emphasise the character's mental fragility. This has resulted in a visual style that rejects USA's trademark formula of crafting "escapist" imagery designed to uplift. The series' approach to framing Elliot as part of medium shots is indicative of this visual style. He is routinely positioned at the margins of the frame – at the sides/corners – within medium shots. This practice leads to the presence of an unusually high amount of backdrop space dominating the frame above and to the side of Elliot. This peculiar approach to medium shots departs not only from prior framing conventions within USA drama series, but also from television storytelling more generally. Further compositional components of such medium shots – namely backdrop elements that are privileged due to framing choices – more specifically contradict USA's "blue skies" conventions. *Mr. Robot's* setting backdrops are not vivified with eye-catching elements but instead typically feature dull lighting, muted colour schemes and mundane objects.

The episode "eps1.4_3xp10its.wmv" (1:5), which concerns Elliot's visit to an E-Corp data storage facility, demonstrates this approach to visual style. Various scenes take place within windowless spaces of the building's confines, including one corridor-set

scene concerning Elliot's interactions with facility employees. The setting here is chiefly comprised of featureless, modestly-lit white walls punctuated by dark-wood panelling. In line with the series' framing techniques, a significant amount of this austere setting is emphasised within medium shots of Elliot, as he is frequently placed to the side and lower half of the frame. The office of Elliot's therapist further demonstrates *Mr. Robot's* breaks with the "blue skies" mise-en-scène conventions. Elliot is typically depicted in this space sat on a couch, his back to a wall-spanning window. In contrast to the aforementioned *Suits'* setting, and various other office spaces within "blue skies" series, the window is fully concealed by closed beige-coloured vertical blinds. This set design choice contributes to shots being largely comprised of dully-lit browns.

According to Tod Campbell (Collins, 2015), who served as director of photography for *Mr. Robot's* first season, the aim of this approach to visual style was to convey Elliot's mental "isolation." "I was trying to erase what's around him, so that it's just his head," notes Campbell (Collins, 2015). As Campbell further acknowledges (Collins, 2015), through its visual representation of Elliot's troubled mental state, *Mr. Robot* departs from the "different, brighter type of storytelling and photography" contained within "blue skies" series. While *Mr. Robot's* visual style has marked a move away from "blue skies" storytelling conventions, it has complemented USA's aim to present the series' protagonist as emotionally damaged. In so doing the visual style has served as a means for the USA Network to satisfy the presumed tastes of millennials.

Demonstrating that *Mr. Robot* sits at the vanguard of a wider channel brand reconfiguration, USA series that have followed in *Mr. Robot*'s wake, have achieved a stylistic consistency with the hacking drama. The channel's supernatural thriller *Falling Water* (2016-present), science fiction saga *Colony* (2016-present) and the action thriller *Shooter* (2016-present), for example, all, like *Mr. Robot*, lean towards a muted colour palette and downcast aesthetic. As in the case of *Mr. Robot* these other series thereby eschew "blue skies" convention. The way in which these dramas have been promoted further suggest that USA has formed a new coherent brand partly on the basis of textual resemblances between the channel's new dramas. The stills used on the usanetwork.com homepage (accessed 7 March 2017) to promote *Colony*, *Shooter* and *Mr. Robot* are all medium shots of these drama's protagonists unsmiling with intense and/or troubled expressions. USA, via such promotional materials, has developed a brand around images of troubled and/or sullen drama protagonists with whom it anticipates millennials might identify. While *Mr. Robot*'s narrative properties are distinct from the USA Network's prior "blue skies" programming, they appear to have underpinned the channel's wider rebranding project.

The analysis here of *Mr. Robot*'s narrative components – Elliot's character and its presentation – gives useful insight into current US cable drama practices. It shows how assumptions concerning millennials' personalities, which inform the sector's targeting of this demographic group, can shape the textual features of scripted programming. By exploring how the USA Network altered its promotional techniques as part of its marketing of *Mr. Robot*, the following section further examines how the

pursuit of millennials is influencing scripted programming practices within basic cable.

“FUCK THE SYSTEM”: Promoting *Mr. Robot*

The case of USA’s marketing of *Mr. Robot* demonstrates how the basic cable sector’s perceptions of millennials influence not only the narrative features of scripted programming but also the way it is promoted. One of the key assumptions informing the industry’s promotional strategies for targeting millennials is the understanding of this demographic group as unique in terms of its uses of technology. As Serazio (600, 603) notes, marketers typically perceive millennials as “digital natives” who are “unreachable through traditional channels,” and therefore aim to address this demographic primarily via the internet. Marketers furthermore look to utilise the perceived online “hypersociality” of this audience, inviting them to share information and content relating to brands, products and services via social media channels (609).⁷

As the promotional campaign for *Mr. Robot*’s first season demonstrates, the USA Network shares this view of millennials’ online behaviours. For example, this perception of this demographic group underpinned the channel’s decision to make the *Mr. Robot* pilot free to view via many on demand and digital streaming services in the month prior to its basic cable premiere in July 2015. Such services included cable VOD services, online video streaming platforms such as YouTube, iTunes, Twitch, Hulu, Google Play, Amazon Instant Video, USANetwork.com and the USA Now app; entertainment news sites such as EW.com, THR.com, TheVerge.com and

IMDB.com, among others, also hosted the pilot episode (Littleton 2015). The scale of this advance preview rollout was unprecedented for the channel.

As Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson (2015, 141) observe, transmedia promotional techniques are in part used to “reassert television’s position as a mass medium of broadcasting by attempting to drive live viewing.” Accordingly, USA’s primary aim with this advance preview rollout was to appeal to – and generate online buzz among – millennials so as to drive interest in the pilot episode’s basic cable premiere (Littleton; Adalian). Media industries’ understanding that millennials are more easily reachable via digital channels clearly fuelled this approach; so too did perceptions that millennials have the strong potential to provide media industries with promotional labour via their social media activities. The USA Network’s objective to prioritise millennials, along with its understanding of this audience’s preferences and behaviours, therefore influenced the channel to implement this innovative promotional strategy.

The materials created by USA’s marketing team further speak to how perceptions within media industries around millennials influenced the channel’s promotion of *Mr. Robot*. As Serazio (609-611) observes, in their efforts to encourage millennials to digitally circulate promotional content, marketers look to ensure that the overtly promotional features of such content is minimal. This is due to marketers perceiving this demographic group as being resistant to sharing “heavily branded” (610) promotional content. According to marketers’ understanding, millennials aim to define “authentic” personas through social media activity, and therefore have no

desire to present images of themselves as compliant mouthpieces for consumer culture (610). Via this logic, millennials are perceived as being more likely to circulate promotional material that is subtle in terms of branding. Due to this perception of millennials' behaviour, notes Serazio (610), marketers aim for their promotional content to blend "in with the 'authentic' communal flows in the digital space."

The series of eye-catching online poster ads that USA circulated so as to promote *Mr. Robot*'s pilot episode premiere strongly reflects this prevalent perception within marketing culture of millennials' preferences. Central to each of the ads is the same headshot of actor Rami Malek (who portrays Elliot) and a distinct slogan – e.g. 'FUCK SOCIETY', 'FUCK WALL ST.', 'FUCK THE SYSTEM' – presented in a white typeface upon a black background (Hibberd 2015). The aesthetic is in stark contrast to the poster ads that USA used to promote prior series such as *Psych*, *Royal Pains* and *Burn Notice*, which feature backgrounds of sunlight and trademark blue skies (Barker 2012, 79-83). The only explicit branding and scheduling information in the *Mr. Robot* ads is, relative to conventional TV poster ads, understated. At the bottom of each ad, covering less than 10 per cent of the image's space, information regarding series title, channel and pilot premiere date is conveyed in a minimalist fashion: '*Mr. Robot* 6/24 USA'. The ads ultimately mimic the form and content of political protest banners rather than draw on the conventions of television posters.

Jonathan Gray (2010: 49, 79) terms such "promotional material... that sets up, begins and frames many of the interactions that we will have with the texts" as "entryway paratexts." The *Mr. Robot* online poster ads conform to certain general conventions

of the entryway paratext. For example the poster ads begin “the process of creating textual meaning, serving as the first outpost of interpretation,” particularly with regard to the way they establish the series’ “attitude” and narrative themes (49-50). The campaign’s provocative post-financial-crash flavour of anti-establishment sloganeering, for example, perfectly complements what Nussbaum (2015) identifies as *Mr. Robot*’s “Occupy-inflected politics.” This promotional material is designed not only be an appropriate gateway to the narrative, however, but also to meet the perceived preferences of millennials. According to current marketing doctrine, the lack of emphasis given within the ads to their promotional purpose ensures that the content has the potential to be shared by millennials on social media.

The marketing team’s approach to disguise the promotional purpose of these ads, and also to limit the emphasis placed upon the USA brand as part of the material, appears to be reflective of a wider trend within branding practices around millennial-targeted content. For example, basic cable channel TBS’ poster ads for its millennial mystery-comedy *Search Party* (2016-present) are arch pastiches of Nancy Drew paperback covers that keep the TBS brand logo minimised. The marketing of both *Mr. Robot* and *Search Party* suggest that, in aiming to meet the perceived tastes of millennials, channels are downplaying their brand identities so as to ensure that marketing does not appear overtly promotional. The case of *Mr. Robot* indicates therefore that the elevated significance of millennials to cable channels, along with channels’ perceptions of this audience, is influencing distinct approaches to promotion and branding within the sector.

The emphasis that the *Mr. Robot* poster ads place on Elliot's opposition to financial and corporate institutions is also configured to appeal to, what marketers perceive as, millennials' desire for programming that acknowledges societal injustices. USA's marketing of *Mr. Robot* shows therefore how basic cable channels' objective to appeal to millennials' presumed thirst for social equality can influence not only drama programming but also the means by which it is promoted.

This is further evidenced by the USA marketing division's "Hacktivation" promotion that ran online in advance of the basic cable premiere of the *Mr. Robot* pilot, and which shared the aforementioned poster ads' focus on societal inequalities. For the campaign, USA partnered with Twitch, the social video-streaming platform, due to the popularity of the service with millennials (The Wire, 2015). The promotion revolved around USA's regular insertion of brief videos within Twitch's 72 hour livestream of 2015's E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) event (The Wire, 2015). In the videos, *Mr. Robot's* fictional hacking group fsociety pledged to bring about the redistribution of wealth through their actions. Viewers were then directed to a separate livestream that gave viewers the opportunity to receive cash payouts (ranging from \$10 to \$5000). This cash give-away operated under the pretence that the activity formed part of fsociety's wider mission to eradicate consumer debt (The Wire, 2015).

Through their alignment with themes of social activism, both the poster and "hacktivation" campaigns were designed to imply that the viewing of *Mr. Robot* and engagement with the USA brand is a politically progressive act. USA's approach to

promotion here forms part of wider processes of what Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee (2012) label “commodity activism” within neoliberal capitalist societies. As part of commodity activism, the authors observe, capitalist corporations, often co-opt “resistance strategies of historic social movements.” In so doing, these companies discursively frame citizens’ consuming of their products and media as socially beneficial activities. Via this practice, “anti-capitalist resistance” ironically becomes “orchestrated and managed by capitalist media institutions” (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee).⁸ The promotional campaign for *Mr. Robot* serves as a clear example of this process.

The USA Network’s adoption of such marketing techniques as a means to promote the series to millennials reflects broader perceptions of this demographic group within media industries as adherent to the logics of commodity activism. This perception is evidenced by Ong’s (Nedeog, 2016) claim that millennials seek programming “where the very act of investing your time to watch it helps make the world a better place because you become more aware of things or even sometimes you can act on things.”

As Johnson (2012, 49-51) observes, various US networks and cable channels have previously aimed to present themselves as socially responsible institutions thereby contributing to processes of commodity activism. However, USA’s promotion for *Mr. Robot*, combined with the series’ narrative themes of radical activism, demonstrates that channels are making social awareness a more centralised component of brands. The increased industrial importance of millennials is motivating this approach.

Entertainment cable channels, because of the prevailing understanding of millennials as desiring content concerning social causes, are incentivised to brand themselves, not as enablers of escapism, but as providers of socially aware programming.

Conclusion

As this article shows, the USA Network's pursuit of millennials, and its assumptions concerning this demographic group's preferences, motivated the channel to alter its approach to the commissioning and promotion of scripted programming. The channel had previously formed a "blue skies" identity on the basis of its dramas' confident protagonists and "happy time" aesthetics, combined with promotional materials that promise escapism. The channel's changed approach in the mid-2010s, however, contributed to a brand reconfiguration for the channel. *Mr. Robot's* gloomy, socially dysfunctional protagonist, its oppressive, uninviting visual style, and an accompanying promotional campaign that nodded to global economic inequalities contributed to a change in tone for the channel's profile.

Via its exploration of the case of *Mr. Robot*, however, the article does not merely give insight into the shifting practices of the USA Network; it furthermore serves as an indication of how basic cable scripted programming and linked channel branding strategies are transforming in light of the increased industrial significance of the millennial generation. It demonstrates how the industry is developing programming and promotional decisions on the basis of wider cultural assumptions that have formed concerning this target demographic group. It shows how perceptions of millennials – as "snowflakes," as "digital natives," as being socially and politically

aware – can filter into narrative features and marketing techniques. It not only argues that such approaches to programming and promotion rely on the millennial personalities that media cultures discursively construct; it furthermore shows how such processes result in the perpetuation of these millennial stereotypes. Further research is required to more fully examine how the increased industrial importance of millennials, combined with institutional reliance on assumptions about this audience, is impacting upon television industry practices.

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¹ The millennial generation is a demographic segment comprised of citizens born in the 1980s and 1990s (Serazio 2015, 600).

² Contemporary media industries, by operating on the basis of this paradigm, continue a longstanding practice within media and advertising corporations of relying on generational categories with a distinct and coherent set of preferences. Such institutions rely on these practices as a means of defining and bringing stability to a fluid and unpredictable marketplace (Buckingham 2006, 8; Serazio 2015, 601).

³ This basic cable practice was first developed in the 1990s by such channels as TNT, USA and Lifestyle (Curtin and Shattuc 2009, 83).

⁴ Examples of such scholarship include: Amanda D. Lotz's (2014, 244-251) detailing of how, in the early 2000s, FX was able to develop a brand around "gritty," hyper-masculine dramas so as to appeal to "upscale" males; Anthony N. Smith's (2013) study of AMC's late-2000s "quality" drama strategy, which was designed to attract affluent viewers to the channel; and Nick Marx's (2016) examination of Comedy Central's efforts to expand its brand appeal beyond straight white males via increased gender and racial diversity within its programming.

⁵ Despite this high median age, USA still attracted, according to Nielsen, more 18-49 year-old viewers in 2015 than FX and AMC due to its ability to attract a larger audience overall (Kissell 2015a).

⁶ The term "blue skies" furthermore has an alternate meaning within a cable television context. It was used as a label within early 1970s trade press to describe the excited, techno-utopianist discourses that were forming around emerging cable technologies (Streeter 1997).

⁷ Such promotional aims form part of a wider media practice, which media studies scholarship has critically interrogated, whereby audiences' online engagement is exploited as a form of unpaid creative labour (Terranova 2000; Andrejevic 2008; DeKosnik 2013).

⁸ Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser's (2012) edited collection *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neo-Liberal Times* critically examines the implications of such commodity activism practices for contemporary society.