

Cartoon Network's Naughty Sister Station:  
Innovations of the Adult Swim Network in American Late Night  
Television Programming

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of

Jack J. Valenti School of Communication

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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By

LUCAS WAYNE MIRELES

December 2010

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research is intended to focus on the relevance and efficacy of the Adult Swim network in late night adult-oriented television programming. Through an active historical case study, it will set out to identify the Adult Swim network as a constructive agent for the resurgence of mainstream adult-oriented animation shows and the diffusion of Adult Swim's particular innovative television form onto other American television networks.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

For:

DAD and DIANE MIRELES

MOM and PHILLIP CHRISTIAN

MATTHEW WADE MIRELES

*I love you very much.*

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| CHAPTER ONE:  |    |
| Introduction .....  | 1  |
| <br>  |    |
| CHAPTER TWO:  |    |
| Defining Adult-Oriented Animation.....  | 10 |
| <br>  |    |
| CHAPTER THREE:  |    |
| The Adults Are Laughing Louder:<br>A Brief History of Prime Time Animation..... | 26 |
| <br>  |    |
| CHAPTER FOUR:   |    |
| Adult Swim and the Diffusion of Innovations.....                                | 39 |
| <br>  |    |
| CHAPTER FIVE:   |    |
| Conclusions and Limitations.....  | 55 |
| <br>  |    |
| LITERATURE REVIEW:.....   | 58 |

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

This research is intended to focus on the relevance and efficacy of the Adult Swim network in late night adult-oriented television programming. Through an active historical case study, it will set out to identify the Adult Swim network as a constructive agent for the resurgence of mainstream adult-oriented animation shows and the diffusion of Adult Swim's particular innovative television form onto other American television networks.

### **Research Objectives:**

- (1) In what specific ways has the Adult Swim network created innovations in late night adult oriented programming?
- (2) In what specific ways have innovations, started by the Adult Swim network, helped to re-launch certain mainstream animations that were otherwise cancelled or discontinued?
- (3) What evidence is there that innovations of a particular television form, originated on the Adult Swim network, have spread to other television networks?

## **The Birth of Adult Swim**

“In many ways, the Adult Swim block is the true mover and shaker of adult-oriented television animation in the early twenty-first century (Booker, 2006).

Adult Swim is a late night American cable television network whose programming block consists of adult-oriented live action and animation shows ("Adult Swim Schedule," 2010). Over the years it has become the premiere venue for the newest forms of animated television shows and since its premiere in September 2001 as a Sunday night three-hour block of adult cartoons, it has grown exponentially in popularity. Today the Adult Swim network is broadcast every night from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. ET/PT in the United States ("Adult Swim Schedule," 2010). Its target demographic consists of males 18-35 and up until 2007, it's programming solely consisted of adult themed animation ("Saul of the Mole Men," 2009). Adult Swim is the only network on American basic cable with the majority of its programming consisting of adult-oriented animated television shows.

Currently, Adult Swim has eight animated and four live action television shows in production, all of which are comedies. It also programs dramatic works of animation with a Friday night block of “anime inflected and often ultra-violent action programs (Booker, 2006).” Adult Swim broadcasts both original and syndicated television shows and provides subscription free access to its website at [adultswim.com](http://adultswim.com). In its video section is posted an array of episodes and video

clips from its current and past programming. Most of which are rotated weekly to reflect its current broadcasting schedule ("Adult Swim Video," 2010).

The true genesis of the Adult Swim network, however, dates back to 1992 with Cartoon Network, which at the time, was the newest venture of the Turner Broadcasting cable company (Booker, 2006). The Cartoon Network would set out to provide programming of animated cartoons on a twenty-four hour per day broadcasting schedule. This would allow for many opportunities to attract different audiences as it employed newer types of animated programming.

"...it was obvious that the late-night audience for Cartoon Network would differ substantially from the typical Saturday-morning cartoon audience, and Cartoon Network quickly moved to begin to develop new programming that would appeal to young-adult and especially college-age viewers, rather than children (Booker, 2006)."

*Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* premiered on April 15, 1994 at 11:00pm E.T. on the Cartoon Network. The program is a post-modern take on a parody talk show. It stars Space Ghost (voiced by George Lowe) who was first seen as a superhero character on a 1966 Hanna Barbara cartoon entitled *Space Ghost & Dino Boy* (1966) ("Space Ghost," 2010).



*Space Ghost & Dino Boy (1966)*

In *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast*, an animated host named Space Ghost would perform a mock interview with various celebrities and musicians (who were not animated) from the fictional Ghost Planet via a television monitor. Sometimes these guests did not understand or were not aware of the humorous nature of the show, which led some to become irritated. Some notable guests include Charlton Heston, Jim Carrey, Willie Nelson and Metallica (Sandler, 2003) .



*Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* (1994)

Since the Cartoon Network was owned by the Turner Broadcasting company, it had the rights to utilize Hanna-Barbara cartoons from the 1960's and 1980's and thus repurposed original animation from *Space Ghost & Dino Boy* (1966) for the show. This kept the show's animation production budget low because instead of paying to animate the cartoons, the show could use parts of original animation and create a narrative based on that. This set a precedent for a method of reusing older animation, of which they had rights for, to create new shows. Having been utilized successfully, this method was later repeated in other original Adult Swim programming such as *Sealab 2021* (2000) and *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law* (2000). All of which are parodies of original Hanna-Barbara cartoons ("Adult Swim Video," 2010).



*Sealab 2020* – Hanna-Barbera (1972)



*Sealab 2021* – Adult Swim (2000)



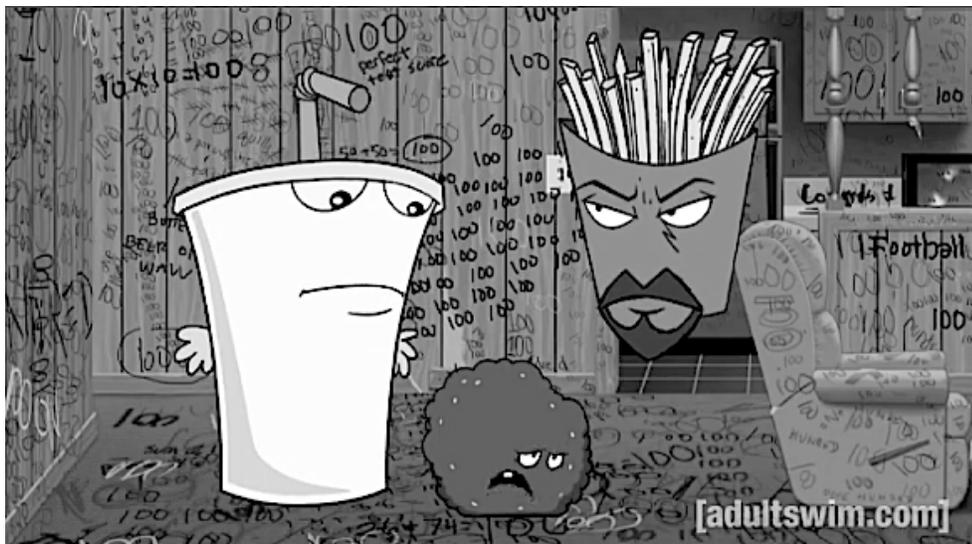
*Birdman and the Galaxy Trio – Hanna-Barbera (1967)*



*Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law – Adult Swim (2000)*

*Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* intended to attract an audience with a wide age-range but as the show progressed its comedic narrative became very bizarre and risqué making it popular amongst late night audiences. From this popularity

soon emerged two spin-off shows: *The Brak Show* (2000) and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2000). Both were created from minor characters that were featured on *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast*. *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, one of Adult Swim's most popular animations, actually emerged from a heroic squad of fast food characters that appeared in one episode of *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* entitled "Blaffer Meal" (Booker, 2006).



*Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2009)

*Aqua Teen Hunger Force* is currently in production of its eighth season on Adult Swim. Since its television premiere it has garnered much success, including a theatrical release of an animated feature film, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force Colon Movie Film For Theaters* (2007) and the Playstation 2 platform release of the video game, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force Zombie Ninja Pro-Am* (2007).

The success of these shows, coupled with the controversial exploits of another adult-oriented animated television show called *South Park* (1999) on Comedy Central, became a launching pad for Cartoon Network to officially premiere Adult Swim in 2001. In time, exponential growth to Adult Swim caused it to be separated in Nielsen Ratings measurement from the Cartoon Network ("Adult Swim/CN Split Cements Strategy," 2005). This was the event in which Adult Swim became its own network utilizing Williams Street Studios to produce animated content. To this day, Adult Swim still shares channel space with the Cartoon Network.



The Adult Swim logo (2010)

## Chapter Two

### Defining Adult-Oriented Animation

What is adult-oriented animation? At first glance, one could speculate that this is what happens under the sheets of Mickey and Minnie Mouse or better yet, Roger and Jessica Rabbit.



Jessica and Roger Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988)

To give it a simple answer, yes, that is exactly what it is: Animated cartoons that portray adult themes.

For this thesis subject it is important to adequately distinguish the terms in this definition. Animation and cartoons are terms that are sometimes confused and used interchangeably. Cartoons are defined as sketches or drawings that symbolize some action, subject, person or popular interest ("Definition - cartoons," 2010). For all intents and purposes, cartoons are the individual images

or “building blocks” that make up animation, like when links are put together to form a chain.

Animation, or to be animated, is the process of giving cartoons the appearance of moving. This is achieved by combining many drawings, each with a slightly different image, that when properly displayed represents a linear progression in movement. The American film projection standard consists of twenty-four frames (or images) of celluloid film per second of real time projection. This in turn, requires twenty-four drawings or cartoons for each second of animation in real time projection.

The word “cartoon” does harbor a humorous connotation especially within the animation community. Even though it is definitively correct, it is sometimes not the appropriate term when used to describe the images in dramatic works of animation such as *Death Note* ("Death Note," 2010) or feature films like Richard Linklater’s *A Scanner Darkly* ("A Scanner Darkly," 2006).



Robert Downey Jr. in *A Scanner Darkly* (2006)

In dramatic animation individual images can be called frames, still shots or just simply images. To give some perspective, describing the aforementioned dramatic animations as just “a bunch of cartoons” would be similar to saying that paintings hanging in the Louvre are just “a bunch of pictures”. Granted, that example is a little over-the-top, but a point can be made that the terms used to describe images in animation are genre specific.



“Revival” – *Death Note* (2007)

It does, however, seem socially acceptable to use the term cartoons to describe animated television shows whose target audience is comprised of a young demographic such as children. Even animated shows whose genre is action/adventure-based like *The Transformers* (“*Transformers*,” 1984) or

Thundercats ("Thundercats," 1985) can be labeled cartoons. This may be because their story content consists of some dramatic elements such as simulated violence but their framing as children's shows and the overall campy tone allows them to be labeled cartoons. Both of these examples are also popularly known as Saturday morning cartoons (Burke & Burke, 1999).

The phrases "adult themed" or "adult-oriented" can be defined as content specifically framed for people of a certain achieved age, usually older than seventeen years old. Though, acceptable age limits are decided at the discretion of each society and can differ. For example, at eighteen years old in the United States, one could legally buy cigarettes but not alcoholic beverages. In a country such as Mexico, at eighteen years old, one could legally purchase and imbibe alcoholic beverages. Both of these age limitations have been decided by each society as acceptable for the content in question. This explanation allows for a broad interpretation of all "adult" material, but for the purposes of this research we will narrow this definition for use in mass media such as film, television and the Internet.

As adult content in mass media becomes more available and widespread, measures have been taken to give consumers the choice to limit exactly who can have access to such material. In the television medium, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), the National Cable Television Association (NCTA) and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) jointly created the TV Parental Guidelines, which is a voluntary video programming rating system ("Commission finds...", 1998).

Its primary functions are to inform the viewing audience about the television program's content and to provide technical requirements for consumer electronic equipment to enable blocking of video programming. This is known as the V-chip ("Commission finds...", 1998). It allowed consumers to block inappropriate content from their television set by establishing viewing preferences that are channel specific.

With the approval over the TV parental guidelines, FCC Chairman William Kennard stated "The FCC's decisions today to approve the *TV Parental Guidelines* and implement V-chip requirements will give parents the tools and power to make their own decisions about television programs they do not feel are appropriate for their children ("Commission finds...", 1998)." The following are the general categories for programs designed for the entire audience according to current TV parental guidelines ("The TV Parental Guidelines," 1997):

**TV-G** (General Audience -- *Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages.*) Although this rating does not signify a program designed specifically for children, most parents may let younger children watch this program unattended. It contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.



**TV-PG** (Parental Guidance Suggested -- *This program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children.*) Many parents may want to watch it with their younger children. The theme itself may call for parental guidance and/or the program contains one or more of the following: moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), infrequent coarse language (L), or some suggestive dialogue (D).



**TV-14** (Parents Strongly Cautioned -- *This program contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14 years of age.*) Parents are strongly urged to exercise greater care in monitoring this program and are cautioned against letting children under the age of 14 watch unattended. This program contains one or more of the following: intense violence (V), intense sexual situations (S), strong coarse language (L), or intensely suggestive dialogue (D).



**TV-MA** (Mature Audience Only -- *This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17.*) This program contains one or more of the following:

graphic violence (V), explicit sexual activity (S), or crude indecent language (L).



With anything labeled as adult content in a mass medium, one must recognize its extremities. One of which is pornography. This genre exists outside of TV parental guidelines because it's content, if broadcast on an inappropriate channel or at the incorrect time, can be sanctioned by the Federal Communications Commission.

Pornography can be defined as writings, pictures, films, etc, designed to stimulate sexual excitement ("Definition - pornography," 2010). More commonly it is referred as having "sexually explicit" or "obscene" material. Usually pornography consists of images of full nudity, sexual intercourse and/or sexual acts with people. Though this does not mean that people are the only ensemble in which pornography can employ. Case in point, bestiality, which is the act of having sexual intercourse with an animal. Pornography also can be generally divided by its degree of explicit material. The terms "soft-core" and "hardcore" describe different intensities of sexual images with soft-core being the lesser or "milder" of the two. The general rules that act as the "line in the sand" are whether a male penis is flaccid or erect and whether full penetration is graphically

shown or implied. To give an example, it is the difference between a Playboy magazine (soft-core) and a Hustler magazine (hardcore).

There are many other sub-genres and degrees of sexual acts as well as definitions in pornography but it does not serve the purpose of this thesis to deconstruct all of those descriptive layers at this point. It is important, however, to note that in the United States, there is an eighteen and above age restriction for purchases, rentals or any other access to pornography or pornographic images.

Thus being a ten billion dollar a year industry, pornography is a very popular genre because, obviously, sex sells (Leung, 2004). As with many other things, an age restriction does not necessarily stop people who are not eighteen years old from obtaining pornography, and now, in this modern era, it can be found in any mass medium and in any form including animation.

### **A Brief History of Controversial and Adult-Oriented Themes in Animation**

To state an obvious fact, every successful television program possesses an element that appeals to the viewing audience in one way or another. It could be an engaging story, award winning acting, the high-end production value or just plain sex on the screen (Chunovic, 2000). Whichever has to keep the viewers interested and more often than not it involves controversy. That's not to say that every successful television show has possessed some sort of controversy or has manifested any such thing to increase ratings. There are perhaps, quite a few

instances of controversy in popular culture that illustrate both the public's and the media's fascination with controversial events.

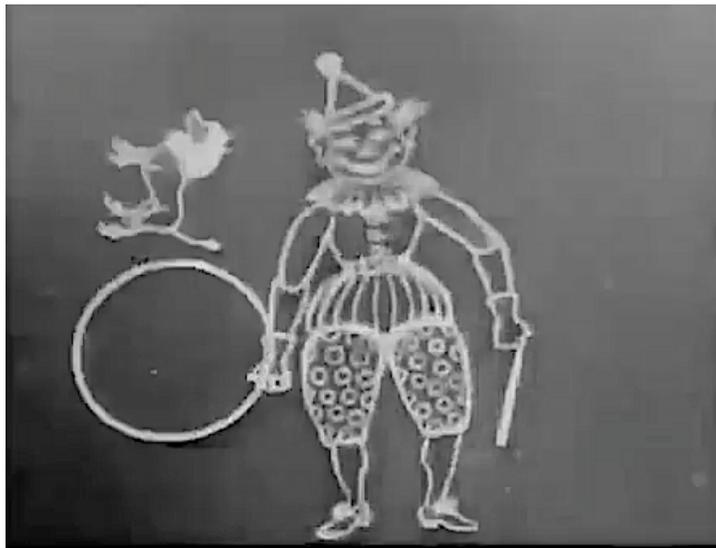
The O.J. Simpson police chase and subsequent trial, President Bill Clinton's public affair with Monica Lewinsky just to name two. More recently it seems that if the names Lindsay Lohan or Mel Gibson are uttered on a television show one can be almost certain that something controversial has occurred.

The very existence of the E! Entertainment Television cable channel, whose purpose is to facilitate audiences with programming primarily focused on the lives of celebrities, supports an idea that the public harbors an intense infatuation with the infamous Hollywood and its persistent players. Also, the program *TMZ* and its website provide up-to-date celebrity news as well as opinion commentary. *TMZ* is an acronym for the "thirty mile zone" which is the union standard for the maximum commuting distance in Hollywood film and television productions before travel compensation ("TMZ," 2010).

Not that this is controversial in itself at all, but this sort of programming does include the reporting on scandalous and potentially controversial behaviors of celebrities ([www.eonline.com](http://www.eonline.com)). The one general theme throughout public controversies such as the aforementioned are that they contain some form of adult content.

Furthermore it is the historical emergence of adult oriented content in animated cartoons that is pertinent to this thesis study. That is not to say that adult content has not been present in animated cartoons until just recently. In fact, adult content was present during the inception of animation in America. J.

Stuart Blackton, known to be the first American to animate a cartoon, produced *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906). Using stop-motion animation, Blackton manipulated chalk drawings to represent various ethnic and social class stereotypes (Beck, 2002). As a comedic short, its humor represented a politically incorrect view of the social hierarchy in America at that time.



*Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906)

It is important to know that in the early years of animation a censorship code was non-existent with silent and the first sound films. Thus, animations were filled with slapstick violence, over-the-top racial humor, and sexual innuendos (Beck, 2002).

One of the first animations to attract a major audience was Pat Sullivan and Otto Messmer's *Felix the Cat*. First featured in a short cartoon entitled *Feline Follies* (1919), Felix was a poor black cat who walked about with his trademark

hands behind his back pose until mischief would eventually befall him. He was the first animated cartoon star of cartoon films and was specifically designed for the silver screen (Silva & Vallejo, 1990).

As popularity surrounded Felix, he was made the first animated cartoon character to be mass merchandized. Even though successful franchises such as Robert Outcault's *Buster Brown* comic strip were seeing national syndication and the merchandizing of its image in 1902, this was a significant stepping stone which allowed for other animators such as Walt Disney to follow suit with the premiere of *Mickey Mouse* in *Steamboat Willie* in 1928 (Kammen, 1999).

Besides being an animated cartoon star, Felix as a character was rough around the edges. Not above smoking pipes, downing a jug of booze, fighting, or even shooting and killing that episode's chosen villains, *Felix the Cat* conveyed controversial behavior and adult themes.

One animated cartoon capitalized on some shock value by introducing a new kind of character who wasn't too hard on the eyes. *Betty Boop* (1930) was introduced in Max Fleischer's sixth installment of the *Talkartoon* series.

Originally drawn as a French poodle accompanied by fellow boy dog-friend Bimbo, Betty eventually underwent a transition to a human state around 1932. At that time her costume is what got people's attention (Silva & Vallejo, 1990). She usually donned a short black dress complete with garter belt and prominently displayed her breasts and cleavage. While other animated female characters such as *Minnie Mouse* had been in gags that showed their panties, Betty was the first character to possess a sexual female caricature.



*Betty Boop (1930)*

The imagery of Betty as a sex symbol of the 30's is significant as her popularity was subsequently cut short by the instilment of the Hays Production Code in 1930 by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) which forced Fleischer to tone down her attire with a longer dress and visible neckline. She reemerged with other popular characters wearing a new less provocative get-up then again later in color to bolster sagging popularity, but nothing could help the series recover its former glory.

The following are the rules and regulations of the Hays Production Code pertaining to sex (The Motion Picture Production, n.d.):

## II. Sex

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common things.

1. Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.

2. Scenes of Passion

- a. They should not be introduced when not essential to the plot.
- b. Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown.
- c. In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element

Though *Betty Boop* did set the stage for future animated sex symbols such as Tex Avery's *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943) and *Jessica Rabbit* of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), a very crucial short film had been made six years prior that illustrated sex in almost all shapes and forms.

*Buried Treasure* featuring *Eveready Harton* (c1924) was an animated pornographic cartoon starring Eveready Harton and his buried treasure, affectionately illustrated as his comically large penis. Apparently this was not an uncommon occurrence for animators to create pornographic cartoon films. A plethora of animated pornography was produced in this silent era but many did not survive. The significance of *Buried Treasure* lies in that it may have been one of the first pornographic cartoon films drawn by professional animators. Thus, the quality of animation was significantly on par or better than other animated cartoons of that day, which may have contributed to its popularity. Even though one of the obvious reasons for its notoriety comes from its animated adult content. It should, however, be known that this is a humorous cartoon

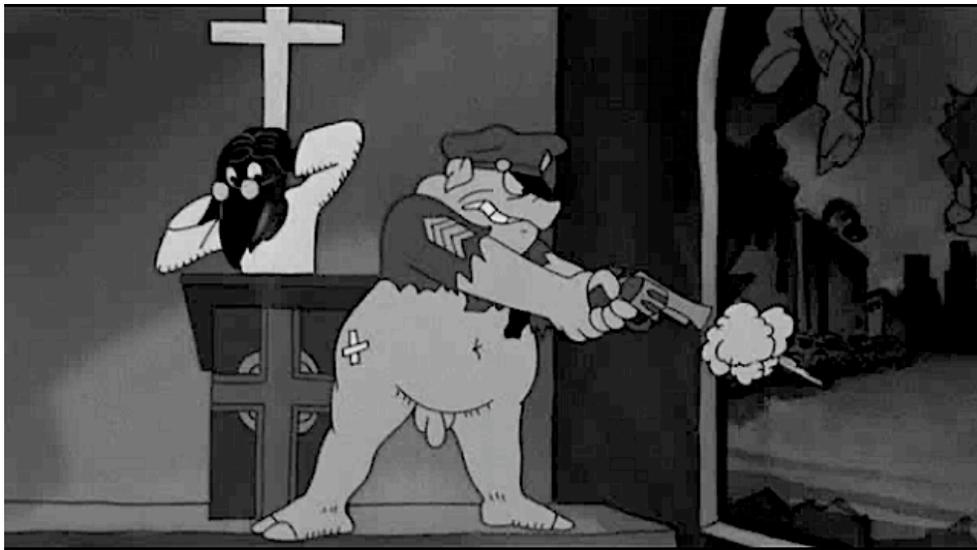
animation that encompasses some rather fantastical elements. Some of which have a realistic basis within the definition of pornography.



*Buried Treasure featuring Eveready Horton (c1924)*

Upon observation, *Buried Treasure featuring Eveready Horton*, displays hardcore nudity including erect penises, vaginas, and women's bare breasts. There are numerous deviant acts performed including: self mutilation, exhibition sex (with five dogs), voyeurism, vaginal masturbation, anal masturbation, foreplay, the drinking of a woman's milk from her nipple (also known as a milk maid), group sex (between two men and one woman), vaginal intercourse, anal rape (between two men), bestiality/fellatio (between two men and a donkey), and glory hole/bestiality where a cow performs fellatio on a man's penis through an open hole in a fence.

Sexual acts (pornographic or mainstream) and subversive tones are used in numerous films in the coming years including *Fritz the Cat* (1972) and *Dirty Duck* (1977) just to name two (Beck, 2002). *Fritz the Cat* became the most successful independent animated film grossing over \$25 million at the box office. It was also the first animated film to receive an 'X' rating from the MPAA, which then forced audiences to see the film at adult theaters ("*Fritz the Cat*," 1972).



A scene from *Fritz the Cat* (1972)

During World War II, a significant collection of animated propaganda films were being produced whose sole purpose was to exploit the stereotypes of the enemies of the United States. Films such as *Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips* (1944) and *You're a Sap, Mr. Jap* (1942) were laden with subversive tones not to mention racially charged against the Japanese. The imagery depicted Japanese soldiers as yellow skinned, buck-toothed savages wielding knives (Beck, 2002).

Do not think though that the Japanese were the only enemies who were done up by the pens of US animators, the same sort of films were produced about Germany's Nazi regime.

To paint a clearer picture of just how far adult themes have come in modern-day mainstream animation, we turn to "Go God Go" which is the twelfth episode in season ten of South Park ("South Park Episode Guide - Go God Go," 2010). In it, a transgendered character named Ms. Garrison, engages in sexual intercourse with a man by being penetrated from the rear (T. Parker 2006)". The dialogue of the scene is as follows:

Ms. Garrison Oh yeah, yeah I'm a monkey! Give this monkey what she wants!

Richard Oh, Ms. Garrison!

Ms. Garrison Oh yeah! Pound my monkey hole Richard! Yeah I'm a monkey  
alright!



"Go God Go" - South Park (November 1, 2006)

## Chapter Three

### The Adults Are Laughing Louder: A Brief History of Prime-Time Animation

“Current prime time animated shows are targeted at adults, with adult satire and humor. A second advantage is the ever-growing population that has been raised on cartoons (Hilton-Morrow & McMahon, 2003)

Today, adult-oriented animation programming is a popular trend in American television not only in late night but also in prime-time. Case in point, the FOX Broadcasting Network’s very successful Sunday night lineup entitled *Animation Domination* (Gorman, 2010). It is a popular programming block consisting of four animated shows: *The Simpsons*, *The Cleveland Show*, *Family Guy*, and *American Dad* (“Fox Animation,” 2010), which are all broadcast back to back during the prime-time hours of 8 to 10 p.m. on Sunday nights (“Fox Network TV Shows,” 2010). Prime-time is an industry term that refers to the block of hours in which certain audiences are most likely to watch television.

Adult Swim has become a proven testing ground for syndicated prime-time animated television shows. Animated shows such as *Family Guy*, *American Dad*, and *King of the Hill* are currently broadcast weekly and are a staple in Adult Swim’s programming (“Adult Swim Schedule,” 2010). *Futurama*, another syndicated prime-time animation is currently being broadcast on the Comedy Central network (“Comedy Central TV Shows,” 2010), but was also apart of Adult Swim programming from January 2003 to December 2007 (Booker, 2006).

Today, new episodes of *Family Guy* and *American Dad* will premiere on the FOX Broadcasting network but then generally around a week afterwards will



the first animated television show to focus on one scenario with the same set of characters (Booker, 2006).

ABC premiered *The Flintstones* on Friday, September 30, 1960 at 8:30pm eastern time. From a network standpoint, programming animation during prime-time was a very bold move. At the time, ABC was struggling in viewership numbers with its established competitors CBS and NBC and was willing to try anything. Though, “anything” is not the proper term to describe *The Flintstones*. The show was a family sitcom, only animated. Set in the prehistoric age, the show follows Fred Flintstone’s life amongst his family, friends, neighbors and pet dinosaur named Dino. The family sitcom, as a type of show, was very popular at that time (as well as today), although *The Flintstones* was an animation, the fundamental popular model was still in place.



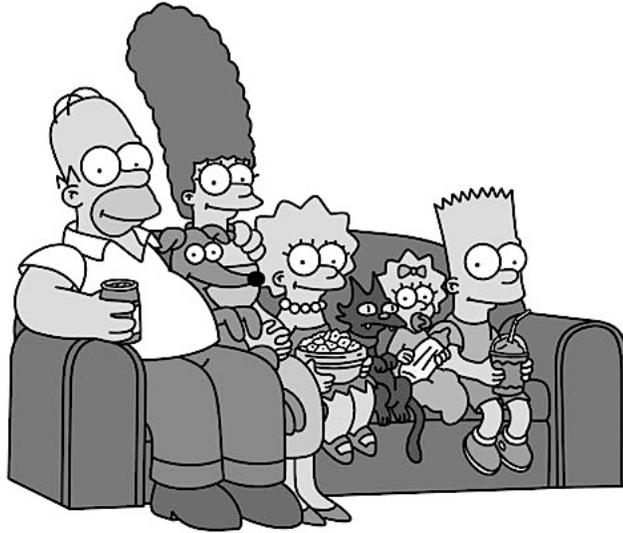
*The Flintstones* (1960)

With the initial success of *The Flintstones*, networks began to order many more animated television shows as a way of capitalizing on animation's newfound popularity in prime-time. Unfortunately, most television shows did not possess the staying power in the ratings that *The Flintstones* had. The many animated television shows that were made that failed to sustain an audience on prime-time were moved to Saturday mornings. Thus creating a phenomenon in television colloquially known as "Saturday morning cartoons" (Burke & Burke, 1999). This occurrence may actually be one of the biggest reasons for the popularity of adult-oriented animation today.

"Industry figures assume that any child over age 8 will have already moved into the competing arenas of fashion, personal accessorizing, and new media entertainments, only to reactivate an interest in their childhood interests at age 17, and sometimes enduringly throughout adulthood (Wells, 2003)."

By 1966, *The Flintstones* was cancelled, which marked the end of animation in prime-time for twenty-three years until the arrival of *The Simpsons* (1989) on the FOX Broadcasting network. It quickly became FOX's highest rated program and marked the beginning of the second prime-time animation boom in American television (Hilton-Morrow & McMahon, 2003).

The show centers on a working class family called the Simpsons and their adventures in the misfit city of Springfield.



*The Simpsons* (1989)

In its first season, sixty percent of *The Simpsons*' viewing audience were aged eighteen and above (Hilton-Morrow & McMahon, 2003). Adults were tuning in to see the show more than children were. Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, spoke about FOX executives being vital to getting the show picked up.

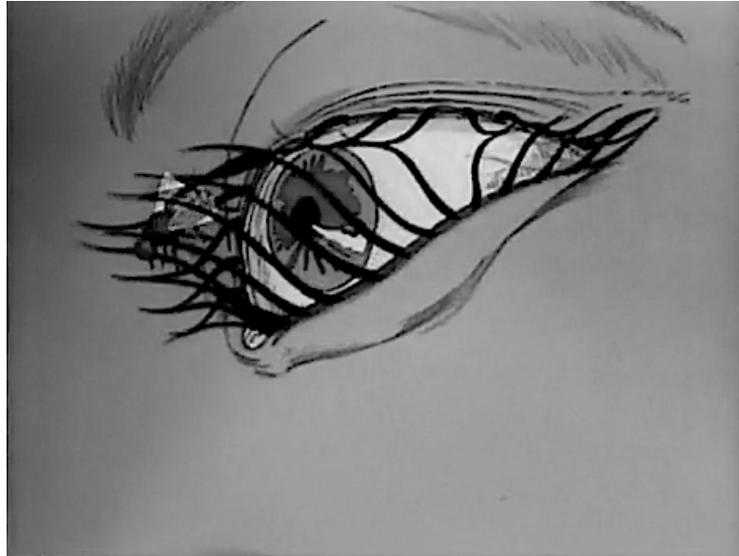
“One of the reasons *The Simpsons* got on the air in the first place was that there were finally some executives who remembered watching *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* and *Jonny Quest* at night as children (Soloman, 1997)

Programming an animated family sitcom during prime time was still a gamble. Even though it was based on a popular model (the family sitcom) many other animated television shows had already failed and as mentioned before ended up on Saturday morning timeslots.

“Significantly, both *The Flintstones* and *The Simpsons* appeared on fledging networks that were trying to distinguish themselves through counter-

programming strategies (Hilton-Morrow & McMahon, 2003).” As ABC did with *The Flintstones* back in 1966, the FOX Broadcasting Network also decided to try “anything” to help bolster their viewership. This sort of counter-programming by FOX was utilized not only to gain viewers but also to abruptly define itself as a unique network in the eyes of the audience. It needed to differentiate itself from its competitors, ABC, NBC and CBS (at that time also known as the “big three”). Fast forward to today and one can see the FOX network’s, *Animation Domination*, still includes *The Simpsons* but now as the longest running comedy in American television (“About - The Simpsons,” 2010). It appears that the FOX Broadcasting network’s gamble paid off. It has created a model for prime-time adult oriented animation programming.

In 1993, MTV premiered an experimental late night animation showcase entitled *Liquid Television* (1993). This thirty-minute block consisted only of adult-oriented animation shorts. Some of which went on to become the most popular shows for MTV including: *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *Aeon Flux*. A live-action feature film entitled *Æon Flux* was theatrically released in 2005 starring Charlize Theron and was loosely based on the television show (“Æon Flux,” 2005).



*Aeon Flux* – Liquid Television (1993)

The advent of a late night experimentation of animation on American cable television is important to note. The beginning of Adult Swim on the Cartoon Network certainly has many parallels to how *Liquid Television* began on MTV. Both started as a small block of late night adult-oriented animation programming on cable and both became popular amongst 18-35 year old males. On *Liquid Television* some animated shorts went on to become standard half-hour animated television shows. Cartoon Network produced spin-off shows from popular original programming and branded its late night block as Adult Swim.



Liquid Television (1993)

*Beavis and Butt-Head* was one of the most popular and successful animation television shows on MTV. It eventually lead to a fully animated theatrical release entitled *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America* (1996). Created by Mike Judge, the show revolved around two high-schoolers named Beavis and Butt-Head and their

“...discussions about TV, heavy-metal music, nachos and trying to "score" with chicks. Their conversations were usually peppered with phrases like "ass-munch," "butt-hole" and "fart-knocker" that became part of the cultural lexicon, as well as uncontrollable giggling ("*Beavis and Butt-Head*," 1993).”



*Beavis and Butt-head* (1993)

In March 1993, the initial popularity of *Beavis and Butt-Head* prompted MTV to begin broadcasting the show as a weekday afternoon program, which made it a hit (Booker, 2006). The program became the center of controversy when a house fire in Ohio killed a two-year-old girl. The show was blamed when the five year old brother of the girl who started the fire admitted to imitating the characters actions in one of the episodes ("Cartoon On MTV Blamed For Fire," 1993). Subsequently many episodes about fire were pulled from broadcast rotation and fire references in other episodes were eliminated (Booker, 2006). It was also moved to a late night time slot and showed this warning before every show:

"Beavis and Butt-head are not role models. They're not even human, they're cartoons. The things they do could cause a person to get hurt, expelled, arrested...possibly deported. To put it another way, don't try this at home."

Mike Judge eventually stopped production on *Beavis and Butthead* in 1997, and went on to make another animated television show, *King of the Hill* (1997) for the FOX network. Today, *King of the Hill* (1997) is currently being broadcast in syndication on Adult Swim.

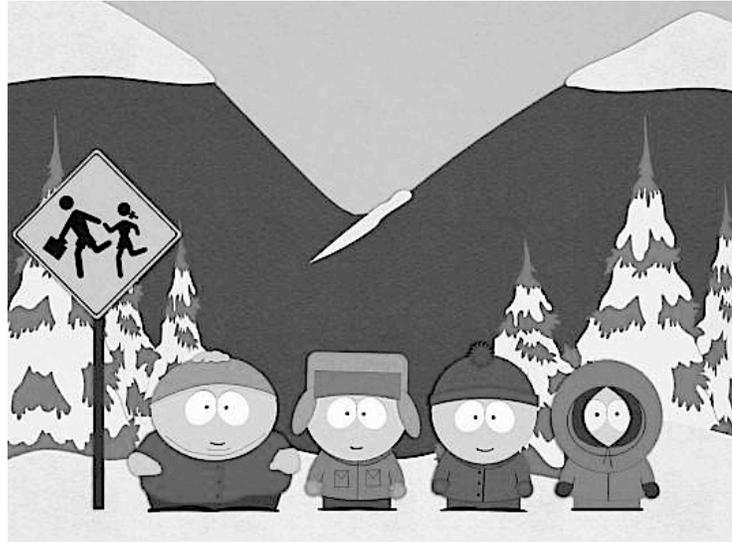


*King of the Hill* (1997)

MTV continued its late night animation programming with the *Beavis and Butt-Head* spin-off, *Daria* (1997). It also programmed another showcase entitled *MTV Oddities* which included adult oriented animation shows such as *The Head* (1994) and *The Maxx* (1995) ("MTV - Liquid Television," 1993). Today, MTV does not currently have any original animation programming on its channel.

In 1997, Comedy Central, a cable television network, tried its hand at original animated programming with the premiere of *South Park*, a Trey Parker

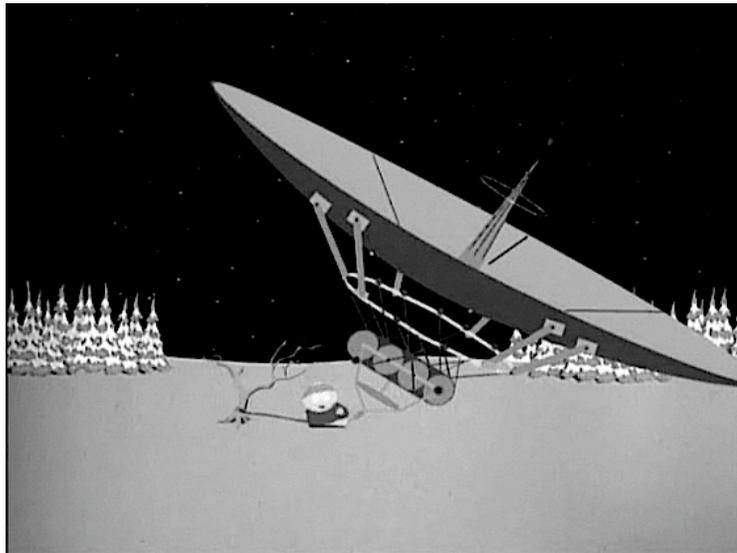
and Matt Stone creation. The show follows four eight-year-old boys (Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Eric Theodore Cartman and Kenneth "Kenny" McCormick) who live in South Park, Colorado.



*South Park* (1997)

The characters usually find themselves in fantastical predicaments and situations that reflect real world issues. It also proves to be a very topical show that utilizes current events within its narrative. In October of 2006, *South Park* was Comedy Central's highest-rated program, attracting 3.1 million viewers an episode and in 2005, the show reportedly generated \$34 million in advertising revenue (Leonard, 2006). One of the biggest attractions of *South Park* is its controversial adult content. It is rated TV-MA, for adult content, by the TV parental guidelines ("South Park FAQ," 2010), though syndicated episodes are re-edited to fit a TV-14 rating.

If previous examples were not enough, its pilot episode was entitled “Cartman Gets An Anal Probe” and depicted an satellite thrusting out of a eight year old boy’s anus.



“Cartman Gets An Anal Probe” – *South Park* (August 13, 1997)

“It was clear to many other viewers, though, that “South Park” was the first great post-Simpsons animated comedy. An entire generation embraced the show in the late 1990s because it was hilarious (Leonard, 2006).” *South Park* is currently producing its fifteenth season on the Comedy Central network with syndicated reruns being broadcast on numerous channels all around the world.

Today, Comedy Central’s adult-oriented programming includes syndicated reruns of *Futurama* (1999) and a new original series entitled *Ugly Americans* (2010) (“Comedy Central TV Shows,” 2010). What is interesting about the success of *South Park* is that it occurred on a cable television network not a

major broadcast network as with *The Flintstones* and *The Simpsons*. This show laid the groundwork for other cable networks, such as the Cartoon Network, to try their hand at original adult-oriented animation programming, hence Adult Swim.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Adult Swim and the Diffusion of Innovations**

#### **The Diffusion of Innovations**

In mass communication research, the Diffusion of Innovation theory sets out to explain the spreading of new ideas. Diffusion research is a subset of Communication research and exists in this way because diffusion is a special type of communication and is the process where new ideas are disseminated throughout members of a social system (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971).

“Diffusion studies are concerned with messages that are new ideas, whereas communication studies encompass all types of messages (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971).” Rogers then goes on to define the term “innovation” as an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new to an individual or another unit of adoption.

One such study described by Rogers and Shoemaker is the way water boiling was introduced into the Peruvian village of Los Molinos. It is an example of how a new idea failed to be adopted within a social structure. Water boiling was being introduced to a low-income village of two hundred families as a necessary method of preventative medicine. Its aim was to decrease the contraction of infectious diseases from the local water supply as well as improve the overall health and hygiene of the village. The focus of this two-year campaign was to convince the housewives in the village that they should include water boiling into their everyday routine. In the end, the communication

techniques that were utilized to help implement this innovative practice only resulted in a five percent adoption of water boiling.

In a traditional diffusion study, such as this, research methods are implemented to track and measure the spreading of innovations within in a social structure. The results of this particular study listed conclusive factors that described how the spreading of this innovative technique was hindered. This data is analyzed in an effort to better understand the spread of innovations and more specifically the flow of communication that was utilized.

The purpose of this thesis research, however, is not to track the spreading of an innovation throughout a social system as Rogers' has done in his study of Peruvian water boiling. This historical case study is being employed in order to identify, not measure, an innovation that has been diffused within the television medium. Particular television forms and methods, originating with the Adult Swim network, will be identified as having been diffused onto other broadcast and cable networks. From the conclusions of this research, one may wish to seek a traditional diffusion theory study regarding innovations in the realm of late night television networks and their programming.

### **Adult Swim Innovations**

Booker states "...the Cartoon Network's late-night Adult Swim block, while not strictly prime time, has offered a number of opportunities for experimentation with new kinds of animated programming that will probably influence the prime-time animated programs of the future (Booker, 2006)."

## **The Resurgence Of Family Guy**

The Adult Swim network has been the laboratory of late night adult-oriented animation programming. As mentioned before it is where some prime time animated shows are picked up for syndication. One of its consistently highest rated syndicated shows, *Family Guy*, had an interesting falling out with the FOX Broadcasting network only to see a reemergence on Adult Swim.

*Family Guy* centers on the Griffins, a dysfunctional family living in the fictional town of Quahog, Rhode Island. Created by Seth Macfarlane, it is a animated family sitcom that broadcast during prime time on the FOX network. It was very much in the same vein as *The Simpsons*. The show's humor is drawn mostly from popular culture and its content includes adult themes. *Family Guy* is consistently rated TV-14 on the TV parental guidelines meaning that the program contains one or more of the following: intense violence, intense sexual situations, strong coarse language, or intensely suggestive dialogue ("The TV Parental Guidelines," 1997).



*Family Guy* (1999)

The pilot episode premiered on the FOX Broadcasting network on December 20, 1998. During its first official season in the fall of 1999, the show lost its regular time slot and was moved around FOX's programming schedule. The days and times of its broadcast changed consistently and often it would be put up against very popular shows on opposing networks (Booker, 2006). These factors contributed to its demise and by its third season in 2002, the show had been cancelled.

Soon, *Family Guy* made its way to the Adult Swim network and quickly became the top-rated program in that block. It would seem that the audience *Family Guy* had while being broadcast on the FOX network had followed it to Adult Swim. DVD sales of its first three seasons were selling in huge volumes and it topped other popular programs such as *Sex in the City* and *Friends* in single season DVD packages (Booker, 2006).

As a result of this renewed audience interest, the FOX Broadcasting network decided to un-cancel *Family Guy* and new episodes began broadcasting on May 1, 2005 ("About Family Guy," 2010). Currently *Family Guy* is in its ninth season of production and has produced two successful spin offs: *American Dad* (2005) and *The Cleveland Show* (2010). All of which are included in FOX's Sunday prime time line up, *Animation Domination* ("Fox Animation," 2010).

### **The Resurgence of Futurama**

"The return of the once-canceled *Family Guy* to the FOX lineup in May 2005 fueled speculation that *Futurama* might someday return as well (Booker, 2006)"

*Futurama* focuses on Philip J. Fry, a New York pizza delivery boy who on New Year's Eve in 1999, accidentally becomes frozen in a suspended animation machine for one thousand years. Now, in the future, he works at Planet Express Delivery Service with a wacky assortment of co-workers that include a crustacean alien doctor, a mutant space captain and a hard drinking robot.



*Futurama* (1999)

Created by Matt Groening (*The Simpsons*), the show premiered in March 1999 in prime time on the FOX Broadcasting network. It ran for four seasons until the summer of 2003. After its cancellation, the show made its way onto the Adult Swim programming lineup in syndication where it quickly became one of its high rated shows. At that time, just as with *Family Guy*, DVD sales of the seasons began to sell in abundance (Booker, 2006).

Then in December of 2007, as Adult Swim's syndication contract expired, *Futurama* was revived by Twentieth Century Fox Television when a deal was struck to produce four DVD movies (Topel, 2007). Twentieth Century Fox Television is a TV production division of Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. Comedy Central then entered into a contract to broadcast syndicated episodes that began on January 2, 2008. On June 9, 2009, Comedy Central picked up

*Futurama* for twenty-six new half-hour episodes which began airing on June 24, 2010 (Goldman, 2010).

### **Bumps**

An interesting innovation of the Adult Swim network is its use of bumps. Bumps or “bumpers” is a term used to describe brief moments of introduction before a regularly scheduled television program. Television networks produce bumps as a sort of segue or transition between television commercials and the start of the program. For example, before a television show begins, a brief title card may appear on the television screen showing the schedule for the next couple hours of programming on that specific network. Sometimes an off-screen narrator may announce something to the effect: “Here’s what’s coming up next.” After about ten to fifteen seconds the bump disappears and the regularly scheduled program begins.

The following is a description of a bump used on the Cartoon Network. The bump begins with music and shows two toy characters walking across the screen revealing the text: Coming Up, The Flintstones (see fig. 1)

A narrated voice says “Coming up next, it’s The Flintstones.”

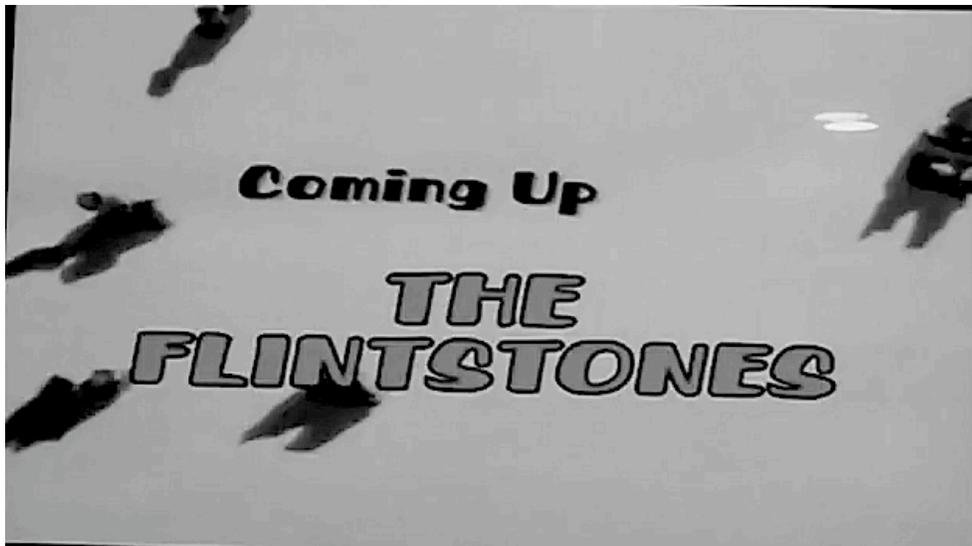


fig. 1 - Cartoon Network Bump

After a few seconds, the same toy characters move across the screen again to reveal the new text: Boomerang, Cartoon Network, CartoonNetwork.com (see fig. 2)

The same narrated voice says “On Boomerang, from Cartoon Network.”



fig. 2 – Cartoon Network bump

Adult Swim has taken this concept of bumps and utilized it in many different ways to fulfill many purposes. The general content of an Adult Swim bump includes background music with either moving or still images that usually includes some form of text. There are two main categories when analyzing bumps ("[bump worthy]," 2010).

The first category can be called Black and White Bumps (or b&w bumps). In these bumps the stylistic choice is primarily black title cards with text displayed in white superimpositions ("Bump Review," 2010). These bumps are very innovative in that this is where the Adult Swim network breaks the fourth wall by directly addressing a question or comment posted by internet users on the adultswim.com message boards. Usually these internet users on adultswim.com's message boards are viewing audience members of the Adult Swim network ("Adult Swim Message Boards," 2010).

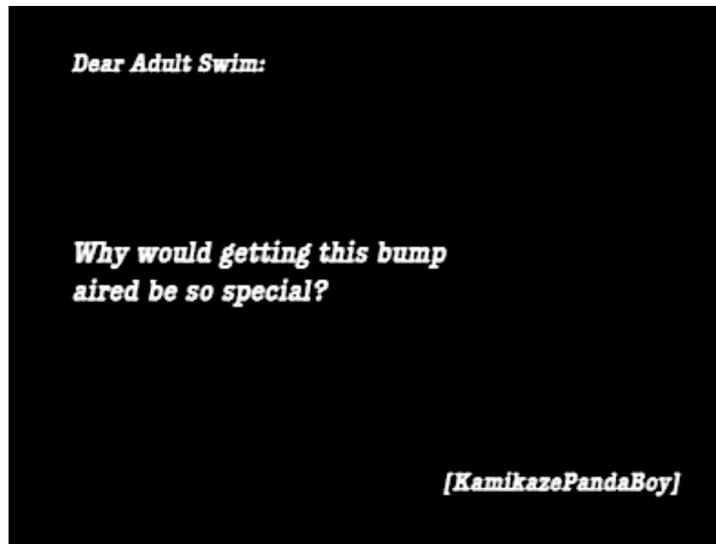
Examples of breaking the fourth wall can be commonly found in popular children's television shows such as *Blue's Clues* (1996) or *Dora the Explorer* (2000). At some point in the narrative of these children's shows the main character will turn and address the viewing audience directly with a question or comment. This is to give an illusion that the fourth wall, meaning the television screen, does not exist and that one can interact with characters in the television show (Abelman & Atkin, 2002).



*Blue's Clues* (1996)

The messages in these types of Adult Swim bumps can be witty with sometimes sarcastic dialogue addressing issues of the audience, making jokes of popular culture and even degrading the Adult Swim network or the shows that are being broadcast. These bumps also sometimes inform the viewing audience of Nielsen ratings measurements and programming schedule changes.

Here is an example of an Adult Swim b&w bump that comments or answers a message board post on [adultswim.com](http://adultswim.com).



Adult Swim B&W bump commenting on audience post (2010)

Here is an example of an Adult Swim b&w bump which addresses current events in popular culture.

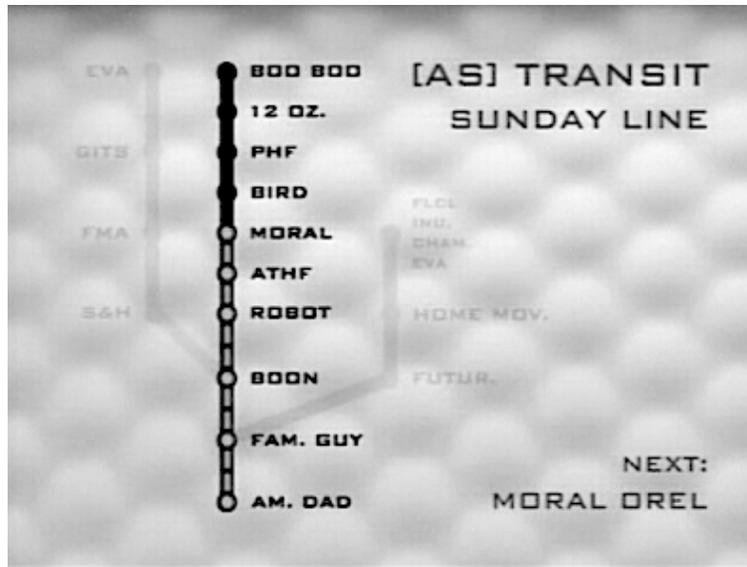


Adult Swim B&W bump addressing current event (2010)

The second category of Adult Swim bumps can be called Identification Bumps or (ID bumps). In this bump category there are three basic uses. It is used as network identification, a programming schedule, or an abstract message. The primary stylistic choices of ID bumps can range from a still photo to a surreal animation. These types of bumps are less “active” and do not engage or break the fourth wall in way that b&w bumps would. In essence, ID bumps are a way of displaying the brand of Adult Swim.



Adult Swim ID bump conveying network identification (2010)



Adult Swim ID bump of programming schedule (2010)



Adult Swim ID bump with abstract message and surreal animation (2010)

During Adult Swim's steady increase in popularity, a rival cable network, Comedy Central, did not employ bumps in between its late night programming.

Usually it consisted partly of Girls Gone Wild infomercials (Stanley, 2007). In the fall of 2010, Comedy Central introduced a version of ID bumps that are very similar stylistically to the Adult Swim model. These Comedy Central bumps appeared before a late night television program on the Comedy Central network and showed a surreal or abstract animation followed by network identification. The network identification at the end of each bump read: Comedy Central Super Late Fun Time.



Ex. 1 – Comedy Central ID bump with surreal animation (2010)



Ex. 2 - Comedy Central ID Bump with surreal animation



Ex. 3 - Comedy Central ID bump with surreal animation (2010)



Ex. 4 - Comedy Central ID bump with network identification (2010)

## Chapter Five

### Conclusions and Limitations

From the information presented in this historical case study there is supportive evidence within the literature review that could deem the Adult Swim network as a very relevant entity in late-night adult oriented programming. In the matter of the Adult Swim network as a constructive agent for the resurgence of mainstream adult-oriented animation; The historical events chronicling the un-cancelling of both prime time animated shows, *Family Guy* and *Futurama*, via late night programming stints on Adult Swim supports this argument.

This resurgence argument though was not some “new research” or culmination of new facts. This statement, especially regarding the resurgence of the animated television show *Family Guy*, has been published in scholarly literature. In the case of the resurgence of *Futurama* however, within the literature review utilized, it was not specifically stated in scholarly research. Though, this was probably attributed to how current its events had taken place in regards to the writing of this thesis research.

When defining adult oriented animation, a lot of focus was put upon defining each individual term in the context of prime time and late-night adult oriented animation in television. Though not a lot of focus was put towards defining each category of the TV parental guidelines. This would have given a greater sense of severity between certain animated television shows.

Furthermore, the differences between an intended target audience and an actual viewer demographic were not established and only implied. An interesting

point could have been made in regards to certain prime time animations whose actual viewer demographic was not included in the intended target audience. This point would have helped to illustrate better the emergence of *The Simpsons* in prime time in 1989.

Adult Swim is responsible for innovations such as cultivating a late night audience for adult oriented animation programming, becoming a sort of “laboratory” for new animation in American television and the unique utilization of its bumps, specifically in its communication with its broadcast viewer audience.

The stated research objectives, one and two, have been supported. Innovations by Adult Swim have been established within late night adult oriented programming and its role in the resurgence of *Family Guy* and *Futurama* was documented. Other innovations found were not included though. Innovations such as eleven minute run times in Adult Swim’s original animated programming and the vast online community which works in tandem with Adult Swim’s broadcasting schedule. These points would have helped to establish Adult Swim’s relevance in late night programming as well as increase the importance of how Adult Swim utilizes bumps.

The final research objective is fully supported. There is clear-cut evidence of a diffusion of an innovation that originated with Adult Swim. The ID bumps that were broadcast on Comedy Central are similar to ID bumps seen broadcast on Adult Swim. Though, this is the only occurrence recognized in this research, it may be because of how current this information is when compared to the writing of this thesis.

This was not a traditional diffusion research study. Its primary goal was to identify occurrences of a diffused innovation. More specifically, how a particular television form spread from one network onto another. From these conclusions however there could be good grounding to conduct a more traditional diffusion research study. There could have been more focus on the act of diffusion in television through a historical standpoint. The research never identified diffusion of other television forms that occurred in the evolution of animation in prime time. If this would have been established, there may have been a better understanding of the diffusion process and its relevance to Adult Swim innovations.

One final limitation would be the absence of a thorough investigation of the Saturday morning cartoon phenomenon. As in most of the scholarly literature, late night adult audiences were generalized as being fans of Saturday morning cartoons. There could have been an interesting identification of Adult Swim as a new late night prime time of the Saturday morning cartoon generation.

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