

Media Convergence and the Rise of *The Walking Dead*

By

Travis C. Yates

The AMC television series *The Walking Dead* is a perfect illustration of media convergence playing a significant role in the growth of a franchise. The digital age has ushered in a new era of media consumption, leaving American consumers with a voracious appetite for new content. To succeed in today's entertainment climate, media producers must use a multi-faceted approach to meet the demands of viewers, listeners and readers. By no means is AMC's parent company, AMC Networks, considered a powerhouse in the American media landscape. The company owns AMC, Independent Film Channel (IFC), Women's Entertainment (WE), Sundance Channel, and the film company IFC Films. With media conglomerates such as Comcast, Viacom, The Walt Disney Company and News Corporation towering over them, AMC has managed to not only survive but thrive in the cable industry. *The Walking Dead* has used media convergence across multiple digital platforms to become one of the most popular shows in basic cable history.

The 2010 debut of *The Walking Dead* was a calculated risk by AMC. In an interview with the popular culture website *Hypable* show producer Gale Anne Hurd explains that AMC decided to forego the traditional pilot formula and instead order six episodes right out of the gate. Along with Fox International, AMC staged a bold worldwide marketing campaign that involved staged zombie invasions in 26 major cities across the globe to coordinate with the program's debut (Hibberd). Ironically, NBC originally passed on *The Walking Dead*, allowing AMC to step

in and take more creative and marketing risks, perhaps ultimately leading to the show's current popularity.

In addition to the use of the traditional television medium, AMC developed a strong online presence for the show that includes the use of a website and social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The landing page of *The Walking Dead* website is interactive with articles, videos, blogs, chat forums and games. It is a veritable one-stop-shop for a fan or anyone interested in learning more about the series. The program's social media presence is robust as well with 22, 565, 587 likes on Facebook and 2,109,835 followers on Twitter as of this writing. According to *Advertising Age* the season 3 debut of *The Walking Dead* drew 10.9 million viewers and 186, 989 social media check-ins, topping the *GetGlue* Check-In chart by more than 133,000 for the week of Oct. 8 – Oct. 14, 2012 (Pardee).

The growing popularity of *The Walking Dead* spawned a live after show series cleverly titled *Talking Dead*. The show is hosted by comedian Chris Hardwick and features discussions with the cast, actors and producers as well as questions and comments from series fans. It too features an interactive website, a Facebook page with more than one million likes and a Twitter page with nearly half a million followers (Neuman).

It is important to note that AMC is a small cable channel in an age of multi-conglomerate ownership. Without the ability to compete in cross-promotion efforts by larger media corporations, AMC seems to have focused its efforts on strong storytelling and a vibrant web-based campaign that builds verisimilitude among its characters within its loyal and growing fan base. The series is sparking a bit of a revolution in the television world, eschewing typical conventions and blazing its own path. Dark material typically reserved for Hollywood cinema

and an unorthodox season schedule with limited episodes stretched out over a longer period of time. The numbers prove the formula is working, as viewership of *The Walking Dead* has climbed steadily from its 2010 debut to 16.11 million viewers in the most recent season four debut in 2013.

The overnight success of the series is a tremendous case study that illustrates that when coupled with the right narrative, media convergence across multiple digital platforms can propel a series on a small cable channel to a global phenomenon. Imagine if *The Walking Dead* producers and AMC executives chose a more tepid marketing approach while maintaining a static website. Perhaps it was the six episode investment AMC made in the early stages of the series that ultimately inspired a more aggressive, modern approach to creating a loyal fan base and building from there. In an age where both networks and cable channels seem to throw ideas at the wall to see what sticks, AMC should be lauded for its bold gamble on unproven material and the systematic and innovative way in which they pulled it off. For a show that features the walking dead as its central trope, the aura of the series *The Walking Dead* is very much alive, interactive, and available on every digital platform you can think of.

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