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Cable Keeps Its Groove Going In 2009

Broadcasters Are Downbeat As Basic Networks' Ratings Rock, Led By Repeat Kingpin USA

by R. Thomas Umstead -- Multichannel News, January 2, 2010

The cable industry began the decade in the ratings shadow of the broadcast networks, but will end it towering above its Big Four competitors in record fashion.

Led by USA Network, which in 2009 repeated as the most-watched basic-cable network, the medium for the first time averaged a 60.7 primetime household share for the year. Cable's performance nearly doubled the combined 32 share garnered by ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox, according to a Turner Broadcasting System analysis of Nielsen data.

Cable's household share has increased every year since 2000 — the last time broadcast-network programming was watched in a majority of households. Back then, before cable networks began developing quality original scripted series and highly-rated reality programming fare, the four broadcast networks averaged a 46.8 household share compared to cable's 41.2.

In 2009, cable's 60.6 share was up 2% compared to 2008's 59.2, while broadcasters' 32.1 share was down 2% from last year's 32.7.

"Viewing shares migrate to cable nets that fulfill strong brand promises with compelling TV programs," Jack Wakshlag, chief research officer at TBS Inc., said. "Broadcast networks seeking cost savings over audience growth inevitably lose market share to cable networks that invest and execute."

On the individual network front, USA Network notched its second straight basic cable ratings title, averaging 3.2 million viewers — a 14% increase over last year's 2.8 million watchers, according to a Disney-ABC Television Group analysis of Nielsen data.

USA's powerhouse lineup of original scripted series — led by veteran spy series *Burn Notice* and freshman shows *Royal Pains* and *White Collar* — carried the network to its third ratings win in four years.

"USA has found a way to reach audiences with entertaining, light programming mixed in with humor," TV historian Tim Brooks, a former USA and Lifetime research executive, said. "Networks that are real serious with their content are struggling in this television environment."

Disney Channel, the last network to beat USA back in 2007, finished a distant second with an average of 2.5 million viewers, up 7% from last year.

ESPN rode the coattails of a strong *Monday Night Football* season to land at No. 3 with 2.3 million viewers, up 8% from last year, while TNT increased 2% to 2.2 million viewers to notch fourth place.

Fox News Channel drew a network-record 2.1 million viewers in 2009 — an increase of 7% over its 2008 average of 2 million — good enough to finish in fifth place for the year.

TBS averaged 1.8 million viewers for No. 6, but was the only top-10 network to experience a year-to-year decline. The "very funny" channel fell 7% from 1.9 million viewers last year.

Nick at Nite (1.73 million, up 2%); A&E Network (1.4 million, up 9%); FX (1.3 million, up 10%) and ABC Family (1.3 million, up 4%) rounded out the top 10.

Nickelodeon remained the most watched network over a 24-hour basis for the 15th straight year, averaging 2.2 million viewers, a decrease of 1% compared to 2008.

Disney Channel finished second with 1.6 million viewers, followed by a tie at 1.5 million viewers between USA Network (up 15%) and Nick-At-Nite (up 2%); and TNT (1.2 million, up 1%).

The majority of Nielsen-rated cable networks garnered increases over last year, with several networks posting record performances in 2009. Food Network cooked up a record average 1.1 million primetime viewers in 2009 — a 26% increase over 2008 — on the strength of several hit series, including hit reality competition *The Next Food Network Star*.

Other networks generating double-digit average audience gains include BET (775,000, up 23%); Nick Jr. (661,000, up 46%); Lifetime Movie Network (658,000, up 16%); National Geographic Channel (457,000, up 12%); CMT (399,000, up 11%); SoapNet (353,000, up 9%); Versus (307,000, up 10%); Disney XD (310,000, up 20%); NickToons (233,000, up 25%); Investigation Discovery (223,000, up 19%); TV One (181,000, up 12%) and Golf Channel (147,000, up 12%)

The addition of popular fashion competition show *Project Runway* couldn't help Lifetime stave off a 20% audience drop from last year as the female-targeted network averaged 1.1 million viewers in 2009. Others suffering double-digit declines included Hallmark Channel (1.0 million viewers, down 17%); Spike TV (1.0, down 17%); Comedy Central (993,000, down 10%); MTV (805,000, down 10%); and The Weather Channel (249,000, down 16%).

On the news front, Fox News and Headline News (561,000 viewers, up 10%) were the only two news networks to post audience increases in the year after the highly-rated 2008 presidential race. CNN was down 30% to 903,000 viewers, while MSNBC (811,000, down 12%) and CNBC (218,000, down 6%) also posted audience losses from 2008.

TNT's *The Closer* continued its reign as the most watched cable original series in 2009, averaging 7.7 million viewers to beat out USA's action-based drama *Burn Notice*. But USA's spy series was basic cable's most popular among the advertiser-coveted 18-49 year old audience, edging out FX's biker drama *Sons of Anarchy*, as well as among 25-to-54-year-olds, besting *The Closer*.

Overall, 19 cable shows drew more than 10 million viewers; 16 were live sports events. ESPN's Oct. 15 *Monday Night Football* game between the Green Bay Packers and Minnesota Vikings had the biggest audience in cable history: 21.8 million viewers. TLC's June 22 episode of the now-defunct reality series *Jon & Kate Plus 8* was the biggest cable entertainment show, with 11.2 million viewers.

'09'S TOP 10

Highest-rated new original basic-cable series for 2009:

Series	Network	Total Viewers (millions)
SOURCE: Turner Broadcasting System research		
1. Royal Pains	USA	7.4
2. White Collar	USA	6.0
3. Men of a Certain Age	TNT	4.9
4. Leverage	TNT	4.2
5. Hawthorne	TNT	4.0
6. Secret Life of the American Teenager	ABC Family	3.9
7. Warehouse 13	Syfy	3.9
8. Drop Dead Diva	Lifetime	3.3
9. Dark Blue	TNT	3.2
10. Meet the Browns	TBS	3.0

RATING THE DECADE

Most-watched basic-cable networks, 2000-09:

Year	Network	Total Viewers (in millions)
SOURCE: Disney-ABC Television Group analysis of Nielsen data		
2000	USA Network	2.3
2001	Lifetime	2.0

2002	Lifetime	2.2
2003	TNT	2.3
2004	TNT	2.4
2005	TNT	2.5
2006	USA Network	2.6
2007	Disney Channel	2.6
2008	USA Network	2.8
2009	USA Network	3.2

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