



How Does NBC Plan To Climb Back Up Rating's Ladder?

by **MANDALIT DEL BARCO**

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NBC was once must-see TV. Now, the network's ratings have slipped behind Spanish Language TV. What happened to this once mighty TV network?

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STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

NBC announces its fall lineup to advertisers in New York on Monday. The network will try again to draw in the viewers that advertisers want most: those aged 18 to 49. The network's own story is itself a kind of drama. It's gone from the top to the bottom. NPR's Mandalit del Barco looks at what happened to the network.

MANDALIT DEL BARCO, BYLINE: There was a time from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s when NBC billed itself as must-see TV. Remember "Friends"?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEL BARCO: "ER"?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEL BARCO: And "Seinfeld."

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "SEINFELD")

JERRY SEINFELD: Not that there's anything wrong with that.

DEL BARCO: For years, the network has been in a free-fall, with dubious scheduling decisions and shows that reek of flop sweat. This is how far NBC has sunk: During the important February sweeps this year, its Nielsen ratings plummeted to fifth place, behind CBS, Fox, ABC and Spanish language Univision.

CHON NORIEGA: One of the original three that were a cornerstone of what it meant to watch television is struggling to hold onto that platform.

DEL BARCO: UCLA TV and film professor Chon Noriega says viewers now have so many choices, traditional TV no longer has a stranglehold. But in myriad ways, NBC television has managed to create its own problems in its primetime, morning and late-night shows. Let's start with primetime.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEL BARCO: Last fall, the network did capture large audiences with football and the singing competition "The Voice."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG)

DEL BARCO: But when football season ended and "The Voice" went on hiatus, NBC lost its autumn glow. Bill Gorman runs TV by the Numbers.

BILL GORMAN: It's almost like they made up their minds, well, you know, we don't want to really take any chances with new shows so we'll really fill our schedule with low-risk things. And they turned out to be low-return things as well. And that's why they finished fifth.

DEL BARCO: Gorman says to be fair ratings at all the broadcast networks have been dropping every year, including NBC.

GORMAN: They've got a couple of dramas that are doing OK, like "Parenthood" and "Chicago Fire" and "Law and Order: SVU." But the rest of their shows this year have just done terribly.

DEL BARCO: These days the network is being held together with "The Voice" and the post-apocalyptic drama "Revolution," says TV critic Maureen Ryan.

MAUREEN RYAN: I don't know what the NBC brand is anymore. They've got everything and the kitchen sink there. And maybe in this day and age branding isn't as important. But I think some degree of coherence is helpful.

DEL BARCO: Ryan is hoping the network becomes more stable and successful with its new owners, Comcast. But primetime ratings alone don't account for the black eyes NBC has given itself.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEL BARCO: Last summer, after months of backstage backstabbing, NBC publicly demoted, even humiliated, "Today" co-host Ann Curry. She gave a tearful goodbye on air.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "TODAY")

ANN CURRY: And for all of you who saw me as a groundbreaker, I'm sorry I couldn't carry the ball to the finish line, but man, I did try.

DEL BARCO: Curry's ousting left viewers seething at "Today" co-host Matt Lauer. It didn't help that NBC's morning show was finally knocked off its 16-year pedestal by ABC's "Good Morning America." Even network executives admitted NBC badly mangled Curry's dismissal. Here's Mo Ryan again.

RYAN: They took something that wasn't necessarily a problem and they turned it into one, which is an NBC special through the last decade or so. Why? Why are you making things worse? Why are you going out of your way to seek trouble?

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "THE TONIGHT SHOW")

UNIDENTIFIED ANNOUNCER: It's "The Tonight Show" with Jay Leno...

DEL BARCO: Changes to the "Tonight Show" have been another self-inflicted debacle for NBC. A few years ago, it messed with an earlier time slot and Conan O'Brien. Then the network brought Jay Leno back to host. But then last month NBC announced it will replace Leno with younger comedian Jimmy Fallon. For his part, Jay Leno continues to make NBC the butt of his jokes.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "THE TONIGHT SHOW")

JAY LENO: Well, doctors in Canada were shocked after pulling a three-inch knife blade from the back of a 32-year-old man. The knife had been in there for three years. Guy had a knife in his back for three years. So, he must have worked at NBC too.

DEL BARCO: After a taping of "The Tonight Show" in Burbank, Leno's fans said they'd continue to watch when the show moves to New York next year with Fallon. But they were hard-pressed to name another NBC show they liked. Minnesota waitress Linda Diaz says TV needs fewer crime dramas, less reality TV and more comedies, more shows she can watch with her niece.

LINDA DIAZ: It's like you can't watch TV with her in the room. She's too young. She asks me too many questions. There's things on there I don't want her to see or know.

DEL BARCO: So just how does NBC propose to save itself? Network executives declined repeated requests to talk with NPR for this story, but if it's any indication of how desperate they are, here's a premise for one new fall program: "The Million Second Quiz," a live 24-7 reality show in which contestants live in a gigantic hourglass structure in New York competing with viewers over trivia. Mandalit del Barco, NPR News.

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