

## Derivative Television and Securitized Sitcoms

In season 3 of the NBC sitcom *30 Rock* (2006–12), the main character Liz Lemon (Tina Fey) is convinced to come on stage with the offer of a gift certificate to Outback Steakhouse, an unpaid mention of the brand, to which she responds with her catchphrase, “I want to go to there.”<sup>1</sup> Two seasons later, the restaurant chain is mentioned again when a crew member is belittled by his estranged wife in front of their son: “David is taking us all to Outback Steakhouse and we’re getting appetizers ’cause David can afford them.”<sup>2</sup> Both references are casual asides, the first an indication of Liz’s enjoyment of “lowbrow” food, the second a status marker to a blue-collar family. In season 6, however, a paid brand integration occurs when Jenna (Jane Krakowski) invites Liz to an Outback Steakhouse for a friendly lunch.<sup>3</sup> Filmed at an actual Outback Steakhouse, with many clearly visible logos, the scene starts with a close-up of a “Bloomin’ Onion,” the restaurant’s signature, twenty-thousand-calorie appetizer. Jenna asks if they should get another one, to which Liz responds, “If you eat four, you get a t-shirt, so one more and that’s two t-shirts.” Upon exiting the restaurant and being hounded by paparazzi, Jenna tells them to “make sure you get the Outback sign in the shot or I don’t get paid.” *30 Rock* specialized in these reflexive brand integrations, but the fact that it was the third reference to Outback, yet the first to be paid, transforms the first two references into product placement auditions. Unpaid referential jokes can secure future paid brand integration, as they did for Outback Steakhouse, Tasti D-Lite, Bed, Bath & Beyond, and others on *30 Rock*. This renders all referential jokes a potential sale, and thus referential jokes as a form are rendered a potential asset class.

If hip hop can be shown to embody fungibility, speculation, and securitization at the level of word choice, as seen in chapter 5, then sitcoms can similarly be shown to embody complex financial processes at the levels of scene, story, and season. Many sitcoms are formally predicated on the concept of the intertextual

reference. Quotations, homages, parodies, soundtrack choices, product placements, brand integrations, and other types of intertextual reference comprise the diegetic world of these sitcoms. Similar to hip hop's lyrical speculation, each of these references contains the possibility of financial return. The difference is that a sitcom is a longer-term commitment than a song or album. From scene to scene, episode to episode, and season to season, thousands of references are made, building a pool of intertextuality that can be bundled and securitized in ways far beyond a song.

The case study analyzed in this chapter is *30 Rock*, a television show that constructed a dense thicket of ironic references and economic relationships. There are a number of sitcoms, past and present, that exhibit a reflexive, highly referential style comparable to *30 Rock*: historical precursors, such as *The Simpsons* (1989–present), *Seinfeld* (1989–98), *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992–98), *South Park* (1997–present), *Family Guy* (1999–present), *Futurama* (1999–present), and *Arrested Development* (2003–6, 2013–19); its contemporaries, such as *The Office* (2005–13), *Community* (2009–15), *Parks and Recreation* (2009–15), and *Archer* (2009–2023); its descendants, such as *Portlandia* (2011–18), *Bob's Burgers* (2011–present), *Rick & Morty* (2013–present), and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013–21); and Tina Fey's later work, such as *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015–20), *Great News* (2017–18), *Mr. Mayor* (2021–22), and *Girls5eva* (2021–present). Though sitcoms are the focus here, this interpretation could be applied to variety shows, reality television, and highly referential scripted shows such as *The X-Files* (1993–2002, 2016–18), *Lost* (2004–10), *Mad Men* (2007–15), *Breaking Bad* (2008–13), and *Stranger Things* (2016–present). Figure 6.1 uses Internet Movie Database (IMDb) data to compare total numbers of references made in reflexive television comedies over the past thirty years. *The Simpsons*, currently in its thirty-fifth season of densely referential television, popularized this style of collage and continues to outpace its rivals, with more than 7,400 references to film, television, video games, and other media.<sup>4</sup> If we stack the references and consider them cumulatively, as in figure 6.2, then we can see this phenomenon accelerate in the early 2000s and expand the market for referential branding to over twenty thousand references, just within this limited set of television series.

This dataset from IMDb is quite flawed and most likely severely undercounts the phenomenon, as it relies on viewer submissions of references. For my analysis of *30 Rock*, detailed further below, I started with the thousand or so references that were cataloged at IMDb, then built on those with my own analysis of each episode, resulting in a total of 2,770 references made in its 138 episodes. With data-visualizations of this work, along with a close textual analysis of the show and its industrial context, I aim to explore the securitization of sitcoms. Similar to the hip hop examples, this security consists of a pool of intertextual references and promotional interconnections, which are unbundled from the underlying asset, the text. Strategies of speculation and hedging enter the text because the future value

FIGURE 6.1. Numbers of references made by reflexive comedies on TV by year, 1990–2022. Data: IMDb.

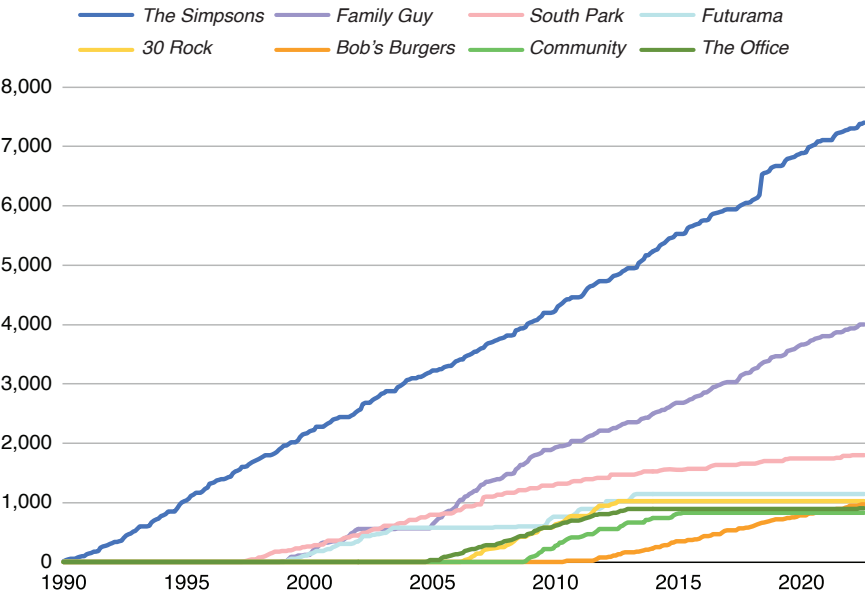
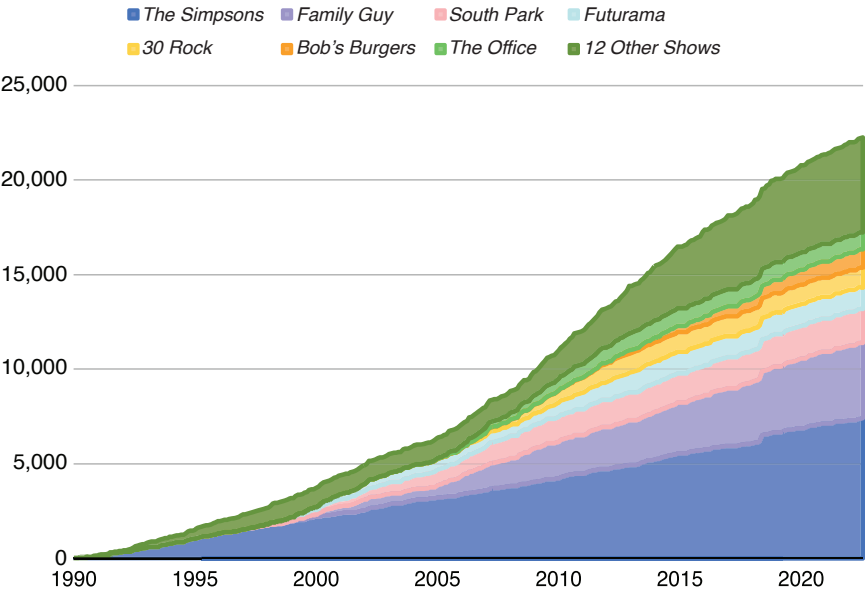


FIGURE 6.2. Cumulative references made by reflexive comedies on TV, 1990–2022. Data: IMDb.



of the asset can be exchanged, as when a reference serves a synergistic purpose or can be leveraged into a paid brand integration, as shown below. A particular focus is the way this referential economy is built into how a scene is constructed and how a story is told, but another tranche in this security is seen in the afterlife of these references and scenes, which are unbundled and re-bundled for various promotional purposes. Reflexive sitcoms are thus shown to demonstrate the derivative logic of a financial futures market.

Premiering in 2006, the first episode of *30 Rock* quickly establishes its conglomerated atmosphere into the setting and tenor of the show: “Surely our massive conglomerate parent company could spring for a samovar of coffee,”<sup>5</sup> one of the staff writers quips as the viewer is introduced to a writer’s room in NBC Studios. This scene follows the show’s title sequence, which consists largely of shots of the General Electric Building at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, the seventy-story skyscraper and centerpiece of twenty-two-acre Rockefeller Center in New York City, where NBC Studios is located. A National Historic Landmark, this complex of nineteen commercial buildings was built by the Rockefeller family in the 1930s; the Radio Corporation of America, which would become NBC, was 30 Rock’s original tenant. It remains the headquarters of NBC to this day, containing the studios for *The Today Show*, *Dateline NBC*, *MSNBC*, *WNBC*, *NBC Nightly News*, *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, *Saturday Night Live*, and other programming.

In 2011, midway through *30 Rock*’s run, a corporate rebranding process used the typography and style of *30 Rock*’s branding in a variety of new enterprises, including Brian Williams’s short-lived weekly news-magazine program *Rock Center*, as well as a new tourist attraction, “Top of the Rock,” which opened the top floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza to compete with the Empire State Building for selling views of the New York City skyline. Rockefeller Plaza is increasingly fashioned as the brand anchor for a variety of attractions, not only NBC television programs but studio tours, attractions (such as its iconic ice rink and annual Christmas tree ceremony), and enough stores and restaurants to qualify as a small shopping center. Though only the exterior of the building was used for *30 Rock*—the interiors were filmed at Silvercup Studios in Long Island City, Queens—the show acted as one of the primary branding mechanisms for Rockefeller Plaza by setting its story within its synergistic space.

This historic, corporate, industrial, and geographic setting provides *30 Rock* with many comedic and satirical opportunities. Primarily, it sets up one of the show’s key themes, which is the struggle between art and commerce in the production of cultural products in a corporate atmosphere. Lightly based on Tina Fey’s experience as head writer and cast member on *Saturday Night Live*, *30 Rock* is a workplace sitcom centered around Liz Lemon (played by Fey), head writer for the fictional show-within-a-show *The Girlie Show*, quickly rebranded as *TGS*. Set at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, the characters on the show (including actors, writers, and

staff members) oscillate between many different places within the General Electric building: the studio where *TGS* is filmed, the offices of writers and producers, other NBC programs and studios, the liminal hallway spaces where different workers interact, and “upstairs to corporate,” personified by GE businessman and corporate climber Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin). The cultural geography of this mediated space extends with every new plot line and setting; totaling 138 episodes over seven seasons, *30 Rock* charted and satirized vast stretches of the mediascape.

The first episode introduces a vibrant dynamic among spaces of media production with Jack’s arrival as the new head of programming. He renovates his grand corporate office, enacts significant changes to the production of *TGS*, and is quick to establish another foundational element of *30 Rock*: synergy. Now a corporate buzzword, *synergy* is a term borrowed from chemistry to describe when the combination of two or more elements produces an effect greater than the sum of its individual effects. In the cultural industries, this process can pertain to vertical and horizontal integration, clustering of core media interests, conglomeration, convergence, cross-promotion, multi-platforming, and other associated business strategies of diversifying and extending content. From a more critical perspective, synergy can be seen as an effort to gain market power and lower labor costs.

On *30 Rock*, Jack continually advocates synergistic business strategies, having built his reputation on the invention of the GE trivection oven (a real product), which combines three types of heat: radiant, convection, and microwave. He applies this concept of synergy to *TGS*, adding movie star Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan, playing a version of himself) in an effort to appeal to multiple markets, particularly the young male demographic. Unbeknownst to Fey, GE decided to run advertisements for its trivection oven during the original broadcast of this *30 Rock* episode, adding some real synergy to their satirical synergy. Promotion, both within the story and in the surrounding media environment outside it, is a recurring phenomenon with *30 Rock* that is never as simple as the show would have you believe.

A series of scholarly articles have attempted to interpret and analyze *30 Rock*’s unique blend of commerce and criticism. Jennifer Gillan’s chapter, “Branding, Synergy, and Product Integration,” in *Television and New Media: Must-Click TV*,<sup>6</sup> is one of the most insightful, contextualizing the show within NBC’s programming lineup at the time, which was calculated for maximum synergy. Linda Mizejewski’s study of women comedians, *Pretty/Funny*,<sup>7</sup> persuasively argues that *30 Rock* functions less as a feminist comedy than a satirical portrayal of a variety of conflicting feminisms and postfeminisms, and how feminist ideals play out in institutions and popular media. Tina Fey’s star image—as expressed in her press appearances, the autobiographical nature of her character on *30 Rock*, and her SNL experiences—has also been subject to much analysis.<sup>8</sup> In particular, Fey’s influential impersonation of Sarah Palin during the 2008 election has been enticing to social scientists studying the impact of entertainment on politics.<sup>9</sup> Yet there is an inherent limitation to these sorts of analyses, which must choose a handful

of pertinent examples to describe and discuss, thus reducing the show's density of meaning. Recent advancements in digital tools and methodologies afford new opportunities to analyze this complexity.

#### DATA VISUALIZATIONS OF *30 ROCK*

For this case study, I've compiled a series of intertextual data points amassed from the cascade of references made in *30 Rock*. My goal was to generate a database with which it would be possible to discern formal and financial patterns from the many intertextual scenes, stories, and seasons of *30 Rock*. As opposed to the clear-cut references to alcohol and automotive brands in hip hop lyrics, the intertextual references here confronted me with the contingency of making decisions on cultural matters that do not have yes-or-no parameters. What even qualifies as intertextual and how it could be quantified were preliminary quandaries, leading to more difficult questions like how might intertextuality act as a site of exchange for cultural and economic capital, how might its value be measured, and how might it be expressed or masked within a text. My aim was to map the political economy of intertextuality of *30 Rock*, noting all instances of a reference to another cultural text or brand. If these references act as a form of currency, providing the possibility for an exchange of value—economic, cultural, or both—then this currency should be quantifiable to some degree, leading to a qualitative interpretation of the role of intertextuality within contemporary narrative. By systematically recording and aggregating these referential transfers, then visualizing the data, I hope to provide a new perspective on the breadth and scope of the relationship between form and finance, intertextuality and political economy.

To build a catalog of explicit intertextuality, I included any reference, aural or visual, to television shows, films, books, musicals, newspapers, magazines, musicians, video games, sports, theater, and websites. I also cataloged any mention of a product or brand, including technology, clothing, restaurants, and many more, while classifying if the product placement was paid for or not. Finally, I indexed all the fictitious and parodic references made on the show, which turned out to be a vast array of fabricated cultural texts, as well as phony products and satirical brands. Of course, the process of manually cataloging references made on the show involved many discretionary choices.

I decided against recording any mentions of celebrities or politicians, even though they could easily be considered texts and/or brands. I also decided against recording every mention of NBC, since NBC is a constant reference on every episode of *30 Rock*. Obviously there are references that I will have missed, though I also consulted scripts, fan websites, and IMDb, which contains a user-submitted catalog of references for every film and television series. Perhaps the biggest interpretative choice I made in cultivating this data was deciding that a reference, product, or brand could be counted only once per episode, a discrepancy that unfortunately makes a quick reference or visual gag equivalent to an episode-long

motif. Admittedly, this shapes the data to express the breadth of references made, rather than attempting to qualitatively evaluate the reference itself. However, measuring the “length” or “depth” of a reference would necessitate the inclusion of even more discretionary choices. My goal was to chart the width, breadth, size, and scope of the political economy of intertextuality, not the approximate “value” of each reference, though that could be a possible future research avenue. Therefore, omissions and disparities are prevalent and expected, though the database is robust enough for several interesting patterns to be discerned.

Once the data was collected, I used the software package Tableau Desktop to generate a variety of visualizations to interpret it. Tableau is primarily intended for business analytics and thus its focus is on “actionable results,” not the type of exploration and experimentation that is prized in the humanities. Furthermore, as Drucker warns, “graphical tools are a kind of intellectual Trojan horse, a vehicle through which assumptions about what constitutes information swarm with potent force.”<sup>10</sup> The point of the reflection on my data-gathering process above and the visualization set below is not to provide a data-based “solution” to some verifiable claim, but to use computational means to explore intertextuality with a scope not possible under traditional interpretative means. With this in mind, readers are encouraged to visit [andrewdewaard.com](http://andrewdewaard.com) to explore the data and visualizations in their interactive form, in which individual data points can be interrogated and the subjective nature of the data-gathering process is more apparent.

Due to the limitations of print, the following visualizations are mere static reproductions, a reduction of a reduction. Nevertheless, figure 6.3 illustrates the rough contours of this intertextual economy. In a television show about television, it is to be expected that one of the top categories for references is television. It is surprising, however, to see that brand mentions are actually the most referenced category. The sheer amount of brands (722) referenced is notable, considering that only eighty-five were officially product placements, as noted by the episode’s credits sequence, which must include a “promotional consideration furnished by” tag when placements are paid for. Of the eighty-five, the majority are from Apple, indicating a long-term contract to integrate the brand into many episodes of the show, resulting in numerous references to its line of products, including the iMac, the Macbook, the iPhone, the iPod, iTunes, and Siri. In fact, many episodes begin in Jack’s elegant, corporate office, where an iMac is clearly visible, effectively starting the show with a mini-commercial.

In figure 6.4, which shows the texts that receive the largest amount of references, we get a sense of the overall referential ecosystem generated in *30 Rock*. In some ways, the intertextual economy of *30 Rock* mimics popular culture more broadly, with certain brands having outsized weight, such as McDonald’s, Oprah, YouTube, and Star Wars (even before the sale of Lucasfilm to Disney in 2012 that renewed the franchise). Apple’s placement is large, befitting its role as the world’s most valuable company, but its placements in *30 Rock* are paid for, as they are in many television series and films, part of Apple’s distinctive, high-end marketing

FIGURE 6.3. Numbers of references in *30 Rock* according to media type. Data: IMDb; author’s observations.

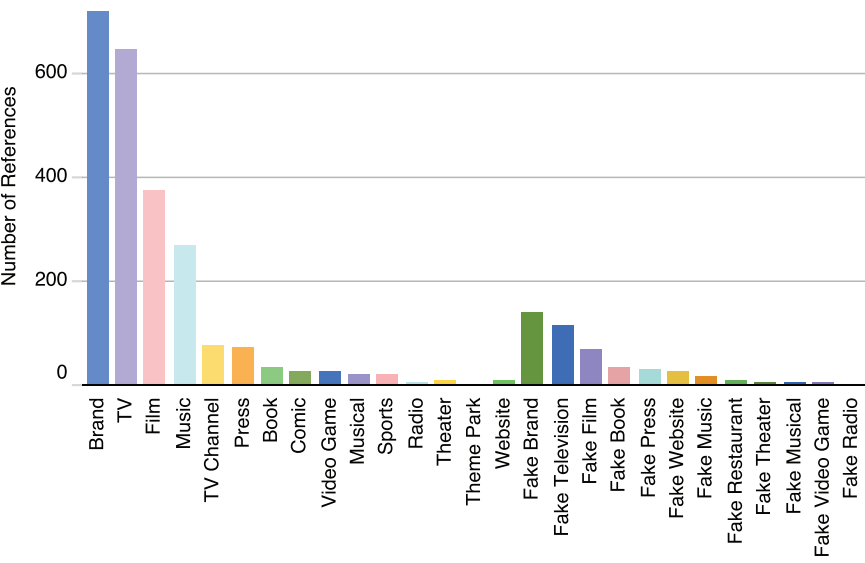
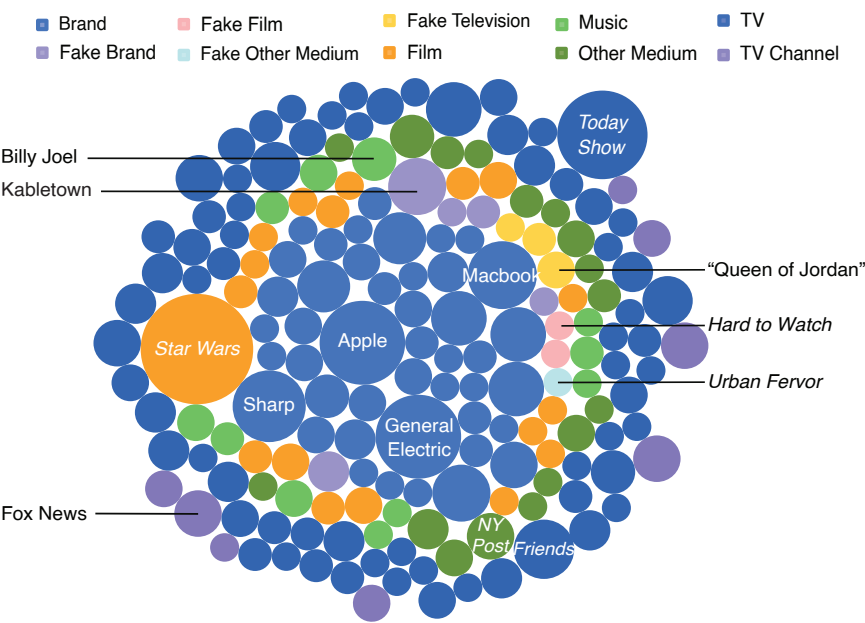


FIGURE 6.4. Top references in *30 Rock*, sized according to frequency. Data: IMDb; author’s observations.





strategy. Unlike popular culture more broadly, other brands, such as *The Today Show*, General Electric, and Sharp, are overemphasized because of their brand relationships with the show. In addition to Apple, clearly a long-term agreement was made with Sharp as well, which provided the televisions that are seen throughout NBC Studios in the diegesis of *30 Rock*. This placement is a natural fit for a television-obsessed show that constantly refers to other television series (650 total) and television channels (seventy-eight). Characters are often seen watching or discussing television, while television brands from elsewhere in 30 Rockefeller Plaza are frequently incorporated. In exchange for providing the many televisions that populate the set, Sharp was integrated into multiple story lines, such as an episode that revolves around Jack purchasing Kenneth a new Sharp television set and challenging him with the ethical quandary of stolen cable.<sup>11</sup> Another episode has Liz buying charity Christmas gifts for a struggling Black family, which includes a Sharp television, a particularly insidious product placement, masked by a joke about Liz's white liberal guilt.<sup>12</sup>

An example of how data visualization can highlight minor details that might not otherwise be noticed, the brand LRG appears quite often, though it is not an officially paid promotion. Digging into the data, it is almost entirely Tracy Morgan's character who wears this "urban streetwear" clothing brand. Considering the fact that he wears the brand at least nine times over five seasons, perhaps this indicates that Morgan had entered into his own promotional agreement with the brand, rather than the show. Tracy wears two other streetwear brands as well, Zoo York and Sean John (the fashion company owned by the aforementioned Sean Combs), but the full extent of these financial relationships is unknowable to the viewer. This may seem like a minor concern, but it's just the first example of many in which *30 Rock* engages in a purposeful blurring of boundaries, obscuring financial exchange. Obfuscation is essential to the financial sector, as asymmetrical relationships to information are crucial for investors. Similarly, in securitized sitcoms, the full extent of the fiscal exchange is concealed, but with added formal mechanisms such as parody, satire, and irony used as camouflage.

The database reveals that this obfuscation of paid promotion is accomplished not just with satirical writing, but with the overloading and blurring of boundaries between real and fake, as well as paid and unpaid. Hundreds of fake or parodic television shows, films, brands, and other texts populate the diegetic world of *30 Rock*, confusing the viewer in regard to what is just a joke and what is a paid promotion masquerading as a joke. Figure 6.5 arranges these references linearly as they occur in each episode, with a ✕ to mark when they are a paid promotion and a color scheme to demonstrate the variability of both medium and parody. Only the first three seasons could fit in this visualization, but the strategy is clear: paid references alternate with parodic references, providing a comedic shroud for the constant onslaught of brands and corporate texts.

Visualizing this data by episode, as in figure 6.6, the variability and instability of this intertextual economy is highlighted. The indicators are erratic, as an episode

FIGURE 6.5. Linear display of references and paid placements in seasons 1–3 of *30 Rock*. Data: IMDb; author’s observations.

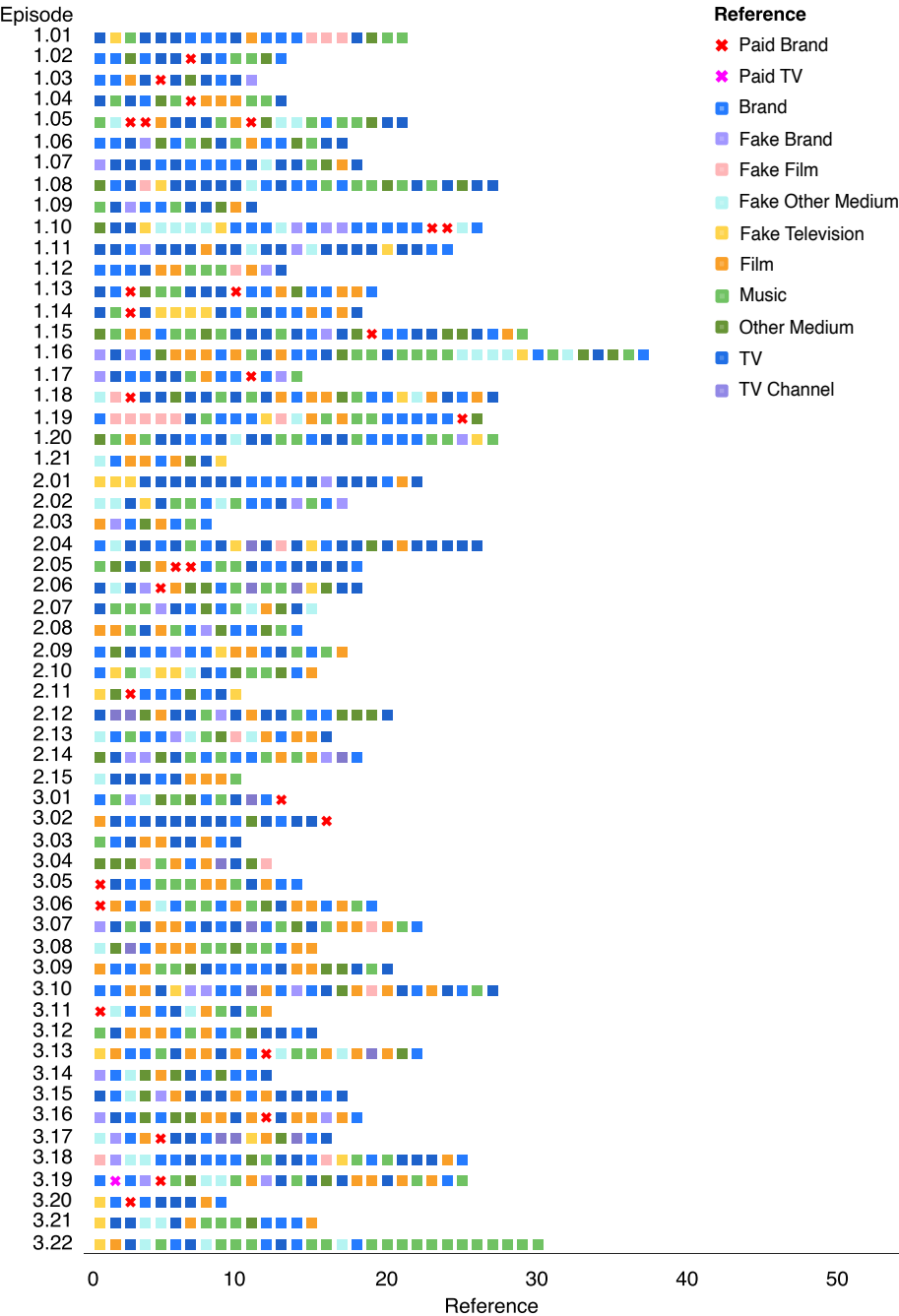
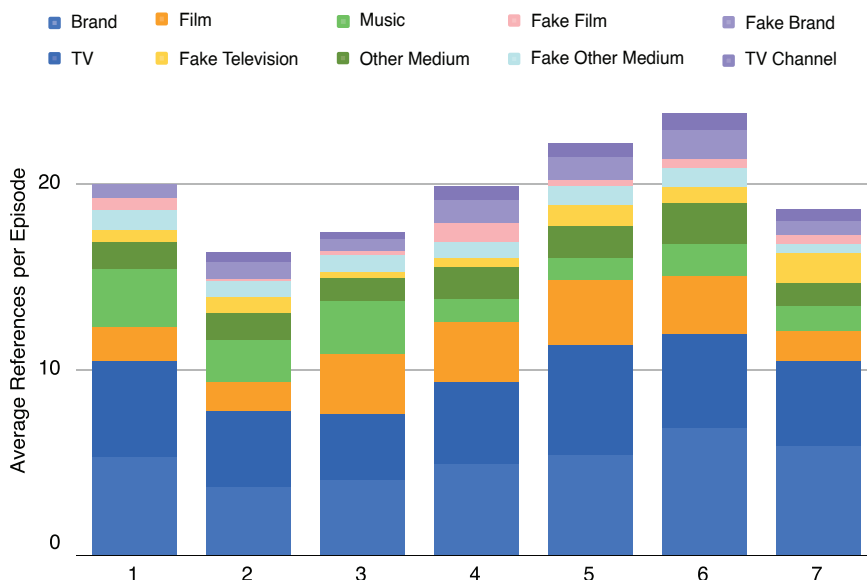


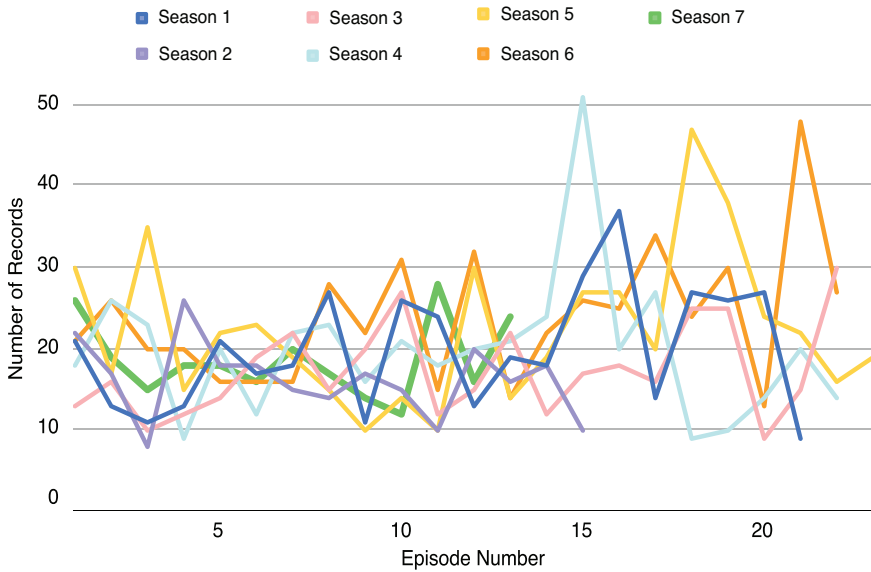


FIGURE 6.7. Reliance on reference in *30 Rock* according to season. Data: IMDb; author's observations.

can have fewer than ten references or more than fifty. The categorical makeup of the references varies as well; brands and television references are the foundation, but many different media are represented, whether pertaining to actual texts or fake texts created for the show for parodic and satirical reasons. *30 Rock* is known for its rapid-fire delivery of jokes, ranking first in a study by *The Atlantic* of jokes per minute in sitcoms: its 7.44 jokes per minute outdid *The Office*'s 6.65, *Friends*' 6.06, *South Park*'s 5.03, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*'s 3.41, among others.<sup>13</sup> However, figure 6.6 reveals a noticeable discrepancy between certain episodes in the dependency on reference-based jokes, a pattern that would be difficult to ascertain without a database and can be considered another layer of its obfuscation.<sup>14</sup>

The next visualization, figure 6.7, is an even more striking example of the kind of discovery only quantification can generate. Amid the flurry of references in every episode, I did not expect to see such a clear, positive trend line from season 2 to season 6, demonstrating a steady increase in the number of references used. Seasons 1 and 7 are outliers; perhaps season 1 relied more heavily on references as the writers were figuring out the show's tone and style, looking to make quick jokes or associations for purposes of characterization, while season 7 did not rely on references as much because the writers were focused on the characters and bringing the narrative to a satisfying conclusion. Regardless, the trajectory for the bulk of the series is clear, with a 50 percent increase over the course of seasons 2–6.

FIGURE 6.8. Increasing variability of references in later episodes and seasons of *30 Rock*. Data: IMDb; author's observations.

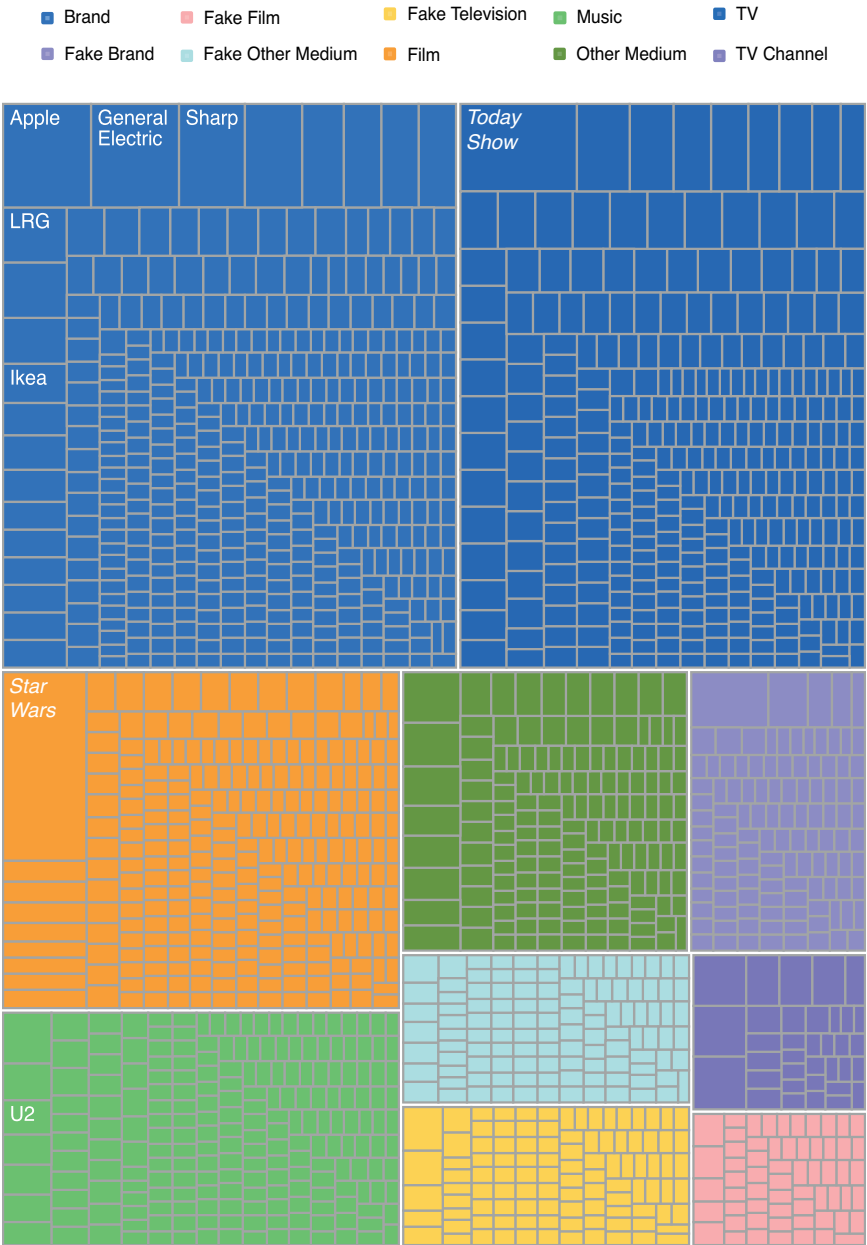


The potential for synergy and speculation in this security grew over time as the complexity of its intertextuality expanded.

The increasing reliance on reference can be further explored by comparing seasons to each other according to references per episode. In figure 6.8, there are noticeably higher peaks and lower valleys, both in the later seasons and in the later episodes of each season. In other words, as an individual season progressed, its intertextuality increased, as did the variability of that intertextuality. Similarly, as the show itself progressed, each season's intertextuality and variability increased. It is tempting to posit a psychological explanation for this outcome: is referentiality a result, in part, of overworked writers? Maintaining quality across the twenty-plus episodes of a single season of a television sitcom is difficult enough; *30 Rock*'s dense writing, quick dialogue, and audiovisual complexity would have presented an even more complicated challenge. Figure 6.8 suggests that one strategy for coping with that difficulty might be an increasing reliance on intertextuality. Another possible answer is that the commercial opportunities of derivative media became more apparent as the show continued and the intertextual market deepened. Regardless of the reason, the effect is the same: an increased possibility for exchange.

The final visualization, figure 6.9, puts these top references in perspective, as each block represents a distinct reference, demonstrating that even the biggest attractions are but a drop in the bucket of the larger ecosystem. The political

FIGURE 6.9. Ecosystem of references on *30 Rock*, each block representing a unique text. Data: IMDb; author's observations.



economy of intertextuality of *30 Rock*, like popular culture more generally, is made up of a vast array of different texts and products, a *mélange* of brands and parodies and different types of media, their varied financial relationships obscured from view.

#### MISE-EN-SYNERGY

As evidenced by these visualizations, the diegetic world of *30 Rock* consists of numerous, intermingling cases of synergy and speculation, running the gamut from offhand reference and throwaway visual gag to product placement and long-term brand integration. It would be tempting to view this synergy as merely the standard use of cross-promotion and multi-platforming, as is common in the film, television, and music industries. However, the high degree to which synergy is an actual, tangible, diegetic component of *30 Rock*, both internally within the show and externally in its broader transmedial texts and marketing (as will be shown below) necessitates that synergy be considered intrinsic to the show's narrative structure, its characterization, its production of meaning, and especially its rich *mise-en-scène* (a French term, adopted in film studies, that means "putting into the scene" or "placing on stage," and refers to everything in front of the camera: setting, lighting, costume, makeup, staging, and performance). "Putting into the scene" on *30 Rock*, and in contemporary cultural texts more broadly, increasingly involves putting another medium, brand, or platform into the scene. It is no longer just producers, executives, and showrunners who balance the needs of budget and creative meaning, but costume designers, set decorators, prop masters, location managers, and other crew members who are now employed in this synergistic process as well, as financialization embeds itself within every facet of the production. Textual analysis typically involves asking questions about a text's form, composition, and style; increasingly, that means asking: Was this formal component for sale? Might it be for sale in the future? What are the market relations and pricing mechanisms among these components?

In effect, this concrete, textual manifestation of economic and intertextual synergy is so fundamental to the form of reflexive sitcoms as to constitute *mise-en-synergy*. While traditional *mise-en-scène* is about the relation between visual style and meaning, *mise-en-synergy* concerns the multi-platform relationship between audiovisual style, meaning, and economics.<sup>15</sup> It can be thought of as a schematic and quantitative approach to the vast, multi-platform, intertextual components that comprise contemporary cultural texts. Using tools such as data mining, distant reading, and data visualization, the economic and intertextual parameters of the form of visual texts can be investigated on a scale that would not be possible without computation. A specific attention to *mise-en-synergy* highlights both textual and financial phenomena, interlocking processes that inform strategies of representation as well as structures of financialization. This *mise-en-synergy*

should be seen not (just) as a crass business decision, but as an integral part of the canvas upon which contemporary cultural texts paint their commercial art.

In light of the vast scope of nearly three thousand references that *30 Rock* employs for a multitude of purposes, its mise-en-synergy should be seen as a form of satirical language crafted to self-interrogate its own industrial and creative processes. Following Clifford Geertz's influential conception of a culture's ability to enact critical analysis of itself, John Caldwell isolates the use of "industrial self-theorizing" in contemporary television and film production—including artifacts, rituals, and mediated forms of reflexivity—which "express an emerging but unstable economic and social order in Hollywood."<sup>16</sup> *30 Rock* can be seen as an example of just such a practice: an on-screen negotiation of the artistic desire for sharp, insightful comedy that must also satisfy the corporate demand for synergy, cross-promotion, and financial speculation. The most explicit case of this self-theorizing is the corporate adspeak that is parodied on the show, exploiting the very language of synergy in order to expose its absurdity.

"When I think of the free-spirited Liz Lemon I met just one year ago," Jack proclaims while presenting her with the GE *Followship* Award, "so resistant to product integration, cross-promotion and adverlingus, it pleases me to see how well she's learned to follow."<sup>17</sup> Another episode is dedicated to "pos-mens" (positive mentions of sponsored products), which includes an exaggerated product placement with Snapple while Liz openly refuses to compromise the integrity of the show. *30 Rock* enacts its own "adverlingus" and "pos-mens" of NBCUniversal properties and other products. In anthropological terms, these parodic buzzwords are examples of "emic" statements: they derive from a point of view where the analysis of cultural systems is defined in terms meaningful to the individual who is a participant within that culture. With its industrial self-theorizing both ironic and lucrative, *30 Rock* develops a critical space for the examination of synergy, conglomeration, and financialization, while also participating in these corporate demands. The complicity with which it engages in these practices is integral to how it can simultaneously satirize them; its mise-en-synergy is both the threat and the opportunity, the obstacle and the insight, the product and the text.

Satirical synergy is seen in a variety of forms within the diegetic world of *30 Rock*; the term itself is explicitly mentioned in ridiculous contexts on a variety of occasions, such as Jack's nonsense excuse for firing staff: "We have to synergize backward overflow."<sup>18</sup> In an episode set at a "GE Six Sigma" corporate retreat, Liz complains that she hates "those corporate things—a bunch of drunk people talking about synergy." "First of all," Jack retorts, "never badmouth synergy."<sup>19</sup> The show creates all manner of exaggerated faux-synergisms as well, including a plot line for Jenna (Jane Krakowski) in which she is auditioning for a Janis Joplin biopic, leading Jack to proclaim: "I love this idea, it's great synergy. By putting a TV actress into the movie world we can promote both. It's like how we're including a *Heroes* DVD with every missile guidance system we sell,"<sup>20</sup> a joke that requires knowledge



of GE's minimally publicized military arms production. At one point, Jack develops a reality show called "MILF Island" and insists that it be cross-promoted on TGS and other NBC platforms, and the rest of the episode's plot entails a parody of the process of synergy.<sup>21</sup> When *30 Rock* ventures into promotion of other, actual NBC shows and channels, however, the synergy stops being purely satirical.

Set at NBC studios in the GE Building, *30 Rock* is inevitably going to promote its parent companies, and the show makes no effort to hide this fact. Kenneth, the cheerful NBC page (entry-level assistant), is often seen affectionately polishing the NBCUniversal logo that hangs above his desk. When giving tours, he wanders hallways covered with classic NBC peacock logos framed on the walls, making for a kind of makeshift NBC museum of memorabilia. At home, his apartment is decorated with NBC merchandise. But the real synergy lies in the constant inclusion of other NBC texts and platforms. Liz's ex-boyfriend is seen on *Dateline NBC: To Catch a Predator*. Jenna confuses Osama bin Laden and then senator Barack Obama on MSNBC's *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. Tracy tries to stab Conan O'Brien on *Late Night*. Jack has an alter-ego named Generalissimo on a Mexican soap opera airing on Telemundo, the world's second largest Spanish-language network, which Jack is trying to acquire (as the real GE did in 2002). *The Today Show* and *NBC Nightly News* also make frequent appearances, as does Brian Williams. Kenneth even exists as a character outside of *30 Rock* proper, with his guest appearances in character on *Late Night* and *The Tonight Show*.

Another form of NBC synergy occurs with the consistent references to old NBC programs: *Friends*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *The Cosby Show*, *Frasier*, *Alf*, *3rd Rock from the Sun*, and *Night Court* have all been jokes, references, or plot points, and many of the actors from those shows have made cameos. Considering the significant revenue streams made possible by DVD/Blu-ray sales and rentals, as well as licensing to digital platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, Apple, and Amazon, these references play an important role in promotion, contributing to the bottom line of *30 Rock*'s parent companies. The same case can be made for the many NBCUniversal cable channels that are referenced or incorporated, including Bravo, MSNBC, Syfy, E!, and others. Movies distributed by Universal Pictures also appear to get favorable treatment, some of which have been the basis of an entire episode's plot line, both contemporary (*Mamma Mia!*) and past (*Harry and the Hendersons*). Many of its overt product placements are done with tongue firmly in cheek, assuring that the viewer is in on the joke, but the countless plugs for NBCUniversal products become merely the language with which *30 Rock* speaks. Though it might joke about its own low ratings and thus ability to sell advertising, *30 Rock* is tremendously successful at behaving as an ongoing advertisement for a diverse range of NBCUniversal products. In turn, the opportunities that arise out of this corporate brand and platform integration are what provide it fodder for its media-industry-and-pop-culture-referencing brand of humor; this "conglomerate satire" both satisfies and subverts a corporate mandate.

*30 Rock* acts as an actual place of advertisement and product placement as well. Its first instance occurs in the show's fifth episode, when Jack proposes that Liz integrate brands into *TGS*. "We're not doing that," Liz proclaims. "We're not compromising the integrity of the show to sell—" "Wow," her producing partner Pete interrupts, "this is Diet Snapple?" "I know," Liz exclaims, "it tastes just like regular Snapple, doesn't it?"<sup>22</sup> A commercial for Snapple followed this scene in the original broadcast, and the show also received money for this satirical product placement. Tom Fontana, heralded creator of *Oz* and *Homicide*, adores and defends the scene, claiming that the issue of brand integration is "not whether you do it but whether you do it well,"<sup>23</sup> and the degree to which it adheres to verisimilitude, nostalgia, and necessity. "In TV the head writers are also producers," Robert Carlock, co-showrunner of *30 Rock* explains. "We are succeeding in serving both the creative and the financial. And isn't that what TV is all about?"<sup>24</sup> These "above-the-line" creatives salute themselves for successfully negotiating the art-and-commerce divide, but this is not always a winning proposition for other workers involved, as shown below through an analysis of the show's marketing and its relationship to below-the-line labor. The intertextual economy of *30 Rock* includes not just the thousands of references it makes within the show, but those outside it as well, primarily in the form of promotion. The show's satirical imbrication of these very processes blurs the divisions between marketing and creative content, which obfuscates the many financial processes that are occurring, setting the stage for further promotion and exchange.

#### MARKETING A SATIRE OF MARKETING

In a hype-driven climate of media saturation, new methods for tailoring content to certain audiences and demographics are a necessity. As it entered off-network syndication in September 2011, *30 Rock* was marketed by NBCUniversal's Domestic Television Distribution arm with a sophisticated technological apparatus called TVPro/MoviePro CMS ("content management system"), which is a database for digital media with an easily navigable interface that allows users to collaborate and easily add metadata. The developer of this program is a Los Angeles-based marketing and postproduction company called DG Entertainment, which cataloged every scene of every episode with searchable metadata in such categories as character, action, dialogue, and location. All of this metadata was then cross-referenced and annotated in context by a small team of editors, amounting to thousands of richly detailed clips. "*30 Rock* is the newest CMS, and it has more features than any of its predecessors," claimed an executive at DG Entertainment I spoke with; it "is definitely the gold standard at this point."<sup>25</sup> In this situation, technology is hailed as an improvement for the business of television; when it was TiVo and DVR that allowed the circumvention of advertisements, a similar technology was considered a detriment. In our conversation, the executive cited

DVR technology as one of the main anxieties that has driven business to DG Entertainment's CMS product. Whereas they once faced networks resistant to give up too much control or access to their content, he said, the new technological paradigm has networks requesting his company's assistance in indexing and leveraging their content through clips.

When the syndication rights of *30 Rock* were sold to Comedy Central and Tribune's WGN America, each station was given access to this detailed database, and was also given access to the cast, in order to shoot original footage for its tailored marketing campaigns. *30 Rock* is itself a very niche product, having struggled with ratings early in its run, later gaining a slightly broader audience following record-setting Emmy nominations and Fey's notoriety from impersonating Palin on *SNL* during the 2008 election. Even without the ratings upswing, however, *30 Rock* was a cherished property on account of its "upscale" demographic: it ranked as No. 1 among adults eighteen to forty-nine living in homes with \$100,000-plus incomes.<sup>26</sup> However, the DG Entertainment executive informed me that both Comedy Central and WGN America took the opposite approach, aiming their customized, CMS-assisted promotional campaigns at a broader audience. Rather than continue targeting a highbrow demographic with the show's satirical edge, political humor, and obscure references, WGN America in particular has used the CMS to find more visual-gag-heavy and character-focused clips with which to market a broader comedy for more casual viewing. After three months of promotion that anticipated its September launch, "local viewers had seen a wide range of promos that emphasized the warm-but-wacky relationships among the show's lead characters and popular supporting players."<sup>27</sup> More than just choosing appropriately humorous clips for promotional purposes, the CMS gives local affiliates the power to craft a whole new identity for their syndicated programs.

Local customization and contextual advertising also play a significant role in the CMS-assisted promotions. For Fox's WNYW New York, the show's many Manhattan locations are linked together with an animated, three-dimensional subway map in commercials. Though designed for New York, the subway motif could also play in Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, and other cities with subway systems. Other local customizations include theme weeks, holiday promos, and contests, such as the "Live Like Jack Donaghy Sweepstakes," which featured clips from *30 Rock* of Jack's excessive lifestyle to sell local lottery promotions. All of these examples are clearly in the promotional category of marketing; where the CMS opens up new, potentially pernicious territory is in the contextual advertising category, where promotion meets commercial—what DG Entertainment calls a "promercial."

A promercial is a "specific branded entertainment message," the executive explained, in which "an advertiser's message is contextually wrapped in the content of an appropriate TV show or movie to promote *both* tune in and advertiser awareness."<sup>28</sup> An example is the Subway-sponsored ad in which a clip from the

“Sandwich Day” episode<sup>29</sup> of *30 Rock* is shown, followed by Subway’s logo and a voiceover: “This *30 Rock* gem brought to you by Subway.” The segment then concludes with a reminder of when *30 Rock* airs each night, effectively promoting both Subway and *30 Rock*. The trick is that these segments qualify as advertisements, not content promotion, so the syndicated programs are receiving bonus exposure in addition to their typical promotional spots. “The goal is to create a sense of viewer benefit that otherwise does not exist for a straight ahead commercial,” the executive continued. “The theory being that when a viewer sees the particular content presented in the format of a promo, they are more likely to watch because there is a perceived viewer benefit.”<sup>30</sup> Here, the product is assuming the guise of the text; the security is obfuscated through creativity.

The impetus for these promercials, the executive explained, is advertisers who, fearing that DVR-using consumers will skip their commercials entirely, ask him “to enhance the prospect that people will see our commercial message.” His solution is to “wrap the commercial message in content that people would like to watch . . . [so that] it doesn’t look like a commercial so much anymore. They stop and go ‘Oh, that’s *30 Rock*, what is that?’” The dual effect of advertising and content promotion facilitates this arrangement: “We’re promoting the show, we’re saying watch it weeknights, but we’re also promoting the sandwich. We’re promoting the show promoting the sandwich.” In marketing parlance, this amounts to “how the two worlds come together and make that a more dynamic enterprise.”<sup>31</sup> For our purposes, the two worlds are also form and finance, which are being intertwined in “creative” new ways.

But what of the intellectual property rights and the creative labor that produced this content that is so easily transported into a new, lucrative marketing context? “If you’re Subway you love this, because in effect Tina Fey is selling your sandwich, but you’re not paying Tina Fey the \$2 million it would cost if you wanted to make her a spokesperson,” the executive elaborated, in an unexpectedly candid moment during our interview. “Well, it’s a bit of a gray area,” he later backtracked, when I questioned him about licensing rights, “but it’s common sense that everybody wins.”<sup>32</sup> The sponsor certainly wins, being associated with creative content that the viewer actually wants to watch, as opposed to the conventional advertisements to which they have become so resistant. In addition, the sponsor lowers the cost of producing that advertisement. They merely slap their name on a creative brand that has already earned consumer loyalty. The local affiliate wins, by generating additional revenue and promoting its syndicated programs. The production company and broadcast network win because of the additional promotion their product receives. In DG Entertainment’s logic, Fey and the creative workers responsible for *30 Rock*’s production also win because of this additional promotion, but as already demonstrated, creative labor loses out in the transmedia arrangement when content is considered marketing and when payment is received only for the original window of release. Proportionally, the sponsors, affiliates, and

networks are profiting off these “promercials” far more than any of the creative workers, let alone the below-the-line workers. While the executive may claim that “the sum total of its many promotional parts” is beneficial to all involved, this equation is more complicated; like supply-side, “trickle-down” economics, the math never quite adds up in the worker’s favor.

“Every piece of pop aesthetic must be seen from the point of view of money,” claims Joshua Clover. “Not just in measuring its success, but in conceiving of what it communicates.”<sup>33</sup> For *30 Rock* and other reflexive, reference-laden comedies, what is being communicated is a purposefully obfuscated marketplace of references the show establishes in order to facilitate the exchange of cultural and economic capital, either presently or in the future. Two different databases of *30 Rock*—one built by myself to critically explore intertextual dynamics, the other by a client of Hollywood studios to exploit the content for marketing—reveal the scale of this futures market.

As in hip hop, all references are rendered a fungible asset, an interchangeable good that can be leveraged for exchange, then packaged into a security. Intertextuality becomes a repository of value that can be exploited through speculative action, and its obfuscation—through clever wordplay, thematic meaning, irony, and other formal means—allows it to proceed without objection. Disguised with a rhyme or a laugh, our songs and sitcoms are turned into stocks and securities.