

Crazy Like a Fox

In starting up a fourth network, Murdoch and crew rewrote television's rulebook

By Stewart Schley

Before there was "American Idol" there was "America's Most Wanted." Before there was "The OC" there was "Beverly Hills, 90210." Before there was UPN and WB and Pax, there was only one company foolhardy enough to try to bust its way into television's broadcast network troika, and that of course, was Fox.

What exists today as an accepted staple of the American television scene, the Fox Network, was anything but that in 1986, the year of Iran-Contra and The Bangles and Corazon Aquino. Breathed to life by Barry Diller and bankrolled by media baron Rupert Murdoch, the wanna-be fourth network was an impossible, stupendous, hole-riddled notion eagerly dismissed by the network bosses of the era.

The unlikely ascension of the Fox Network into the television pantheon is the stuff of an interesting, if occasionally earnest, book written by David Kimmel. The longtime *Variety* correspondent knows his subject, and has a handy knack for drawing the human element from the business headlines.

Kimmel's new book, *The Fourth Network*: (Ivan R. Dee, 2004, 323 pages) is worthy reading for broadcasting professionals, in particular. Those in the trade's trenches will recognize in the story of the Fox Network the origins of many modern-day attributes of the broadcasting business. Before Fox, of course, the network TV game revolved around pure mass – the cultivation and steady feeding of gargantuan coast-to-coast audiences. It was Fox, more than any cable network, that introduced the advertising community for good to the idea that network television could bring a radio-like sensibility to the game. Instead of pursuing the widest possible swath of consumer America, Fox vowed

to work within a lesser boundary of the mass market. For Fox, of course, it was the 18-34-year-old column in the Nielsen ratings tables that mattered, and the network hammered away at its chosen target with a relentless determination to be hipper, smarter, edgier and less reverential than ABC, CBS and NBC. Fox, too, is credited with altering the course of television by latching onto a concept familiar in the consumer products world but remarkable at the time for the network scene. It was the notion that a television network, rather than serving purely as a loose collection of scattered TV programs, could formulate its own personality, an identifiable brand that would bring a common voice and sensibility to the entire viewer experience.

This is common stuff today, particularly in the multichannel worlds of cable and satellite TV, where network logos adorn every minute of programming appearing on the screen and channels are divided and sub-divided into sliver-thin but brand-defined niches (think MTV and its dozen or more music-channel offspring). But in 1986, when Fox was beginning to cobble together a loose amalgamation of affiliated stations, it was brilliant, breakthrough positioning.

Not everything worked as planned, of course. Kimmel's dense, detailed reporting is packed with examples of bad decisions on the part of Fox programming executives, some of them hilariously flawed. For every signature breakthrough like "The Simpsons" or

"Married, with Children," for instance, there were howlers like "Studs" and the lamentable "When Animals Attack."

Broadcast professionals, too, will recognize in the grind of starting up a new TV network some common foibles of the broadcasting trade: Bad management decisions, clashes of ego, overly optimistic interpretations of offhand

focus-group comments. When Kimmel writes about programming executive Sandy Grushow's determination to block a proposal for a show called "The X Files," it's bound to bring a knowing nod from any radio or TV veteran who's privately second-guessed a boss.

Kimmel's book is a good read not just for its insight into the U.S. broadcasting business, but also for its rear-view glimpse of popular culture signposts that fade just as quickly as they appear. Remember "The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers?" How about hockey pucks that glowed as they skittered across the ice?

As the architect of the fourth network on the U.S. broadcast TV scene, Murdoch doesn't get the same sort of credit owed to industry patriarchs like Sarnoff and Paley. But for rewriting the rules of the game, and influencing the way new networks, cable or over-the-air, would go about their business ever since, Murdoch and Fox Television have earned a lasting place in the medium's history. "The Fourth Network" sets out the story in workmanlike detail, and should emerge as a standard reference about the formative days of a modern television giant.

