

FALL TV PREVIEW

# Thursday night's all right for fighting

Open season on night NBC, CBS have battled for

By John Cook  
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Toward the end of the pilot for "Joey," the much-hyped "Friends" spinoff debuting Thursdays this fall on NBC, newly arrived Angelino Joey Tribbiani delivers a heartfelt speech to his sister on life's turbulent inconstancy and the virtues of embracing it.

"Change can be good," Joey says, days after having left behind a decade of cushy cafe living in New York. "Nobody understands wanting things to stay the same like I do. . . . But just hoping things stay the same — it doesn't work."

It's a soliloquy that could just as easily come from the mouth of an NBC executive: Nobody understands wanting things to stay the same like the Peacock.

For an astonishing two decades, going back to the days of "The Cosby Show," NBC has owned Thursday night. With powerhouses such as "Seinfeld," "Friends," "Cheers," "L.A. Law" and "Hill Street Blues," the network has dominated in viewers — particularly the 18-to-49-year-olds sought by advertisers — and in revenue on the most lucrative night of the week in broadcast television.

But change is coming: With the departure of "Friends," the continued success of CBS' "Survivor," "CSI" and "Without a Trace," and the addition of promising upstarts such as Fox's "The O.C." and the WB's "Blue Collar TV" to the Thursday lineup, industry executives say Thursday night is in play like never before.

"'Friends' has left a huge hole in Thursday," said Laura Caraccioli-Davis, senior vice president at the media-buying firm Starcom Entertainment.

"Everyone is coming to play in their own way now," said Kelly Kahl, executive vice president for program planning and scheduling for CBS. "NBC is certainly no longer this big fortress on the hill that no one



Sean Faris and Missy Peregrym in "life as we know it."



Donald Trump and Kara Udel listen to a potential candidate for "The Apprentice."



Matt LeBlanc as Joey Tribbiani on "Joey."

could challenge."

Thursday is not the top night of the week for television viewing — Sunday night, on average, has more viewers — but the confluence of two factors makes it by far the most important: More 18-to-49-year-olds watch TV on Thursday nights than any other night, and it is the last chance for movie studios to market their films to a mass audience before opening weekend.

**Top dollar**

"When you look at the whole week, more than any other night, Thursday is when you're guaranteed to reach more of the demo," Caraccioli-Davis said. "That's an audience that the movie studios pay top dollar —

more than any other advertiser — to get."

They paid \$2.4 billion for it last year — that's the total revenue for network ads sold in Thursday night prime time in 2003, according to TNS Media Intelligence, a media research firm. And nearly half of that — a little more than \$1 billion — went to NBC. CBS got the next biggest chunk, \$678 million, with the remainder divided among ABC, Fox, the WB and UPN.

Overall, 19 percent of the networks' total revenue last year came from Thursday, a night that accounts for just 15 percent of the total prime-time schedule. NBC is the most Thursday-centric network, owing nearly one-

**The battle for Thursday viewers**

Prime-time ratings for Thursday nights during the 2003-04 television season, in total viewers and viewers ages 18 to 49:

NETWORK	TOTAL VIEWERS	18-49 YEARS OLD
CBS	21.2	9.5
NBC	18.9	11.5
ABC	7.0	3.1
UPN	5.1	2.5
FOX	4.4	2.5
WB	2.6	1.3

Source: Nielsen Media Research

Chicago Tribune

third of its total ad revenue to those precious three hours.

**Potentially weak**

While few expect NBC to lose in revenue or 18-to-49-year-olds this season — there is still the matter of a certain Mr. Trump for its competitors to contend with — it is seen by almost all of the networks as potentially NBC's weakest Thursday night in recent memory.

"I think CBS has been very effectively clawing away at NBC for about three years," said Preston Beckman, Fox's executive vice president of strategic program planning. "With 'Friends' gone at the top of the night, it's like their foundation is starting to crumble a little bit."

CBS first moved against NBC three years ago, when it broke with the industry practice of keeping promising shows as far as possible from the buzz saw of NBC's Thursday lineup by putting "Survivor" and "CSI" against "Friends" and "Will & Grace."

Within a year, CBS overtook NBC in total viewers for the night. From 2001 to last season, CBS' numbers have jumped 16 percent, from an average of 18.3 million viewers to 21.2 million, while NBC's has fallen 5 percent, from 19.8 million to 18.9 million, according to Nielsen Media Research.

"CBS was really smart a few years ago trying to make Thursday competitive," Caraccioli-Davis said. "Everyone else sort of sat it out. But CBS worked really hard to program that

night."

NBC is still ahead among 18-to-49-year-olds, but that lead has steadily eroded as well, dropping 8 percent from 12.5 million in 2001 to 11.5 million last season — though the success of "The Apprentice" helped NBC stanch the bleeding and hold essentially steady for the last two seasons.

At the same time, CBS jumped 8 percent in the demographic, to 9.5 million.

**Revenues affected**

The trend is reflected in the revenue, as well. Between 2001 and 2003, CBS' Thursday night ad sales jumped 34 percent while NBC's grew by just 10 percent.

Most troubling for NBC is its performance this summer prior to the Olympics, when, despite the success of "Last Comic Standing" and usually reliable reruns of "ER," it trailed CBS by 6.3 million viewers overall and 1.8 million 18-to-49-year-olds on Thursday.

"I don't think they're going to fold up the tent and go away," Kahl said of NBC. "But change is when you're most vulnerable, and they have quite a bit of change. We have very little change. I would hope that we could continue to close the gap in demos."

"We're in a stronger position this year than we were last year, with as solid a lineup as we've had in five years," said Jeff Zucker, president of the NBC Universal Television Group, who is, as one would expect, bul-

lish about Thursday night.

"I'm sure 'The Apprentice' will come out like gangbusters — it will likely maintain its hold over 18-to-49-year-olds," Caraccioli-Davis said. "But it's hard when your show is based on a living icon [like Donald Trump]. You have to be careful, because the public could grow tired. Go back to when ABC rested all their laurels on Regis Philbin."

Of course, it's not just NBC vs. CBS on Thursday night.

"I think 'The O.C.' is going to make things real interesting," Kahl said.

"With all due respect to 'Joey,' it's not 'Friends,'" said Fox's Beckman. "What's exciting for us is with 'Friends' going away, and with 'The O.C.' emerging last season as potentially a must-see kind of show, we have a show that's targeted to [viewers in their teens and twenties]. That's exactly who advertisers are looking for on Thursday night."

There's also the surprise success of the WB's "Blue Collar TV," which has brought the network some of its highest ratings ever this summer leading off Thursday night.

"It's exceeded our wildest expectations on so many levels," said David Janollari, the WB's president of entertainment, who is hopeful that, as the only network comedy opposite "Joey," the sketch comedy show can siphon off some younger viewers. (Tribune Co., which owns this newspaper, holds a 22 percent equity stake in the WB.)

Whatever happens this season — and all signs still point to at least one more year on top for NBC — there is no doubt that the sort of total, unequalled dominance over one night of the week that NBC has enjoyed for 20 years is over. Whoever wins on Thursday night in years to come will, in all likelihood, win just barely, and they will do it with intense competition from broadcast and cable networks. Gone for good are the days of "must-see TV."

"There's a generation that was raised to look at Thursday night that way," Caraccioli-Davis said. "But the WB and Fox are looking for a new generation that doesn't have an allegiance to any one network. It's entertain me and entertain me now."

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