

I Want My FredTV: An Interview with Fred Seibert

Written by Steven Heller

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Fred Seibert has excelled in more media careers than there are media forms to master—or so it might seem. In the '80s he was the creative force behind MTV's original on-air promotions and helped propel Nickelodeon and its spin-off networks to their current success. He went on to become president of Hanna-Barbera, and even co-founded a chocolate company for entertainment-licensed candy. Currently, this 2000 AIGA Medal recipient runs Frederator Studios and Channel Frederator in New York, feeding animation and other comic content to cable TV (particularly the Cartoon Network) and via podcast. Over the past year, Seibert has emerged as one of internet TV's prime movers and shakers. His Next New Networks is the next big thing in the revolution from conventional TV to something, well, next—and new. We caught up with Seibert long enough to channel his views on community-driven content and programming for the niches.

Heller: You call your new venture Next New Networks, but are they networks in the conventional sense of the television experience?

Seibert: Yes and no. The definition of a media network has morphed tremendously over the years. From the '30s through the '70s, in radio and television, a broadcast network meant a bunch of local stations that played a lot of the same programs, delivered to them by telephone wires. There were only a few networks, so they all had very broad, mass-appeal programming to satisfy everyone in the family. By the '80s a cable TV network came to mean 24 hours a day with dozens of narrowly defined programming genres (delivered by satellite) like news, sports, music, kids, weather, what have you. Well, those telephone cables and satellites have gone out the window, anyone can access anything they want, and at Next New Networks we feel that.

Heller: So, how do you define the new television network?

Seibert: It's a place where you can go to satisfy exactly the kind of programming you've always wanted but conventional delivery systems could not deliver because of cost and distribution limitations. Now the world is different. We watch television in lots of different ways on lots of different boxes. We "cable," we "Tivo," we "iPhone," we "YouTube." Those telephone cables and satellites have gone out the window.

Heller: And then there's on-demand TV...

Seibert: Our Next New Networks are on-demand—not continuous play—micro-television networks that serve specialized communities slivered by specific interests. They’re more like magazines and radio stations than what we’ve all become used to on broadcast and cable. We’re not just cars but fast European cars, Corvettes, or street racing. Not just fashion, but do-it-yourself fashion, jewelry fashion, the fashion in every woman’s closet. Not just entertainment, but sophisticated cartoons, indie film, and internet culture. And all our networks are branded experiences where the distance between the producers who make the network and the viewers who watch, promote and distribute our networks is almost indistinguishable.

Heller: What do you want to communicate through your hundred new networks?

Seibert: We love watching TV, we love making TV, and there’s nothing better than being able to make an audience happy, no matter how narrow their interests. If we can do that a hundred times a week, we’ve done our jobs.

Heller: Are these just trial balloons and whatever doesn’t burst will continue to fly? Or do you feel that they all have viability?

Seibert: All our networks are really partnerships between our talented staff and their audiences. Everything starts out when we’ve found there’s a vibrant community underserved by television programming. Sometimes they’ll embrace what we’re offering, sometimes we’ll be off the mark.

Heller: I know you have a show about radical knitting—I guess anything these days can be made into a TV show—but are there standards?

Seibert: Sure. If an audience, small or large, falls in love with what we’re presenting, my standards have been exceeded.

Heller: What are your top ten, and why?

Seibert: You don’t really think I like one child more than another, do you?

Heller: Are these new shows predicated on the fact that everyone can be a TV producer?

Seibert: Yes and no. At our joint, the audience is a complete part of our networks in any of a number of ways.

Heller: How so?

Seibert: Anyone in any era with talent and craft could be a producer. Only now there are no significant barriers—technological or financial—for the producer to expose their work to an audience, a distributor, or a network. We find our producers in what you’d think of as “normal” channels of professional referrals, but also when a viewer sends in a film that blows us out of our chairs and leads to a call out.

Heller: YouTube has certainly changed the way we think about broadcasting. Isn't this all just a scrapbook of videos produced in any which way?

Seibert: I think maybe you're reacting to all of the "user-submitted" action—15 seconds of fame—out there on the internet. At Next New Networks our audiences are always part of the networks. Sometimes it's with video they submit to us—a cell phone video, a million-dollar cartoon, a video comment—or with a blog comment or phone call. And in a complete business revolution, community members are actually important distributors for us, since they can take various feeds we offer them to literally run our networks on their own websites or blogs.

Heller: If the do-it-yourself aesthetic reigns, what is the new definition of professionalism?

Seibert: Hmm. There's always been room for DIY in the modern media era of the last hundred years. Orchestral musicians bemoaned the primitives who played homemade guitars in the Mississippi Delta or amateurs who pounded out "Louie Louie" in a Seattle garage to the top of the pop charts. Then, as now, about the only distance between the first song of these "uncultivated" and a career was enough control of their skills to create longevity from an accidental phenomenon.

Heller: And TV, too?

Seibert: It's no different now in television. Truth be told, I was made vice-president of production at MTV in the early '80s before I'd ever set eyes on a television camera. My boss, Bob Pittman, told me not to worry: "You'll figure it out." I guess I did. And by the way, most of the young folks we meet who want to work with us now, whether it's from our office in New York or their garages back home, are a lot more craft-literate than I am today.

Heller: What is the business model? How do you make money?

Seibert: Advertising, as far as we know. Broadcasters have relied only on advertising for ninety years. Cable started as subscription, evolved to advertising, and quickly added fees paid by cable operators to create their revenue streams. Who knows where this version of the business will evolve?

Heller: What is the artistic model? Who decides what will work?

Seibert: At first it's our staff—currently about thirty people ranging in age from 19-to-56-years old, with a variety of experiences from recent college dropouts to full-bore professional filmmakers. But, you know, ultimately, like most everything else we actually pay attention to, the audience finally decides what it loves.

Heller: With so much on the internet how do you expect to compete—and who do you expect to compete with?

Seibert: Isn't that the question?

Heller: After Next New Networks, what's Next?

Seibert: Ha! If you find out, let me know.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, Second Edition and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).