


[◀ Back to Article](#)
[🖨️ Click to Print](#)

# TIME

Friday, Dec. 04, 2009

## NBC

By Dan Fletcher

The powers that be are taking away Jack Donaghy's microwave ovens. The cast of *30 Rock* — a show about a fictional program on a very real TV network — will have to find a new target to make fun of, now that cable giant Comcast has finalized its bid on a majority stake in NBC Universal. If the plan gains final approval from government regulators, Comcast will have effectively bought a controlling 51% stake in the entertainment company from General Electric in a deal worth some \$30 billion. As GE's vice president of East Coast television and microwave-oven-programming, Donaghy, played by Alec Baldwin, is at a crossroads — as is NBC, once home to shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, whose ratings have lagged in recent years. The network, at least, is used to it.

[\(See the top 10 post—\*Saturday Night Live\* careers.\)](#)

NBC was the U.S.'s first major broadcast network, founded in New York City in 1926 by the Radio Corporation of America (a subsidiary of General Electric) as a ploy to sell radios. (Radios absent programming, after all, are rather worthless.) Dubbed the National Broadcast Company, it originally had two separate networks, both focused primarily on the East Coast: the Red Network, which broadcast entertainment and music, and the Blue Network, which carried news. In 1927 the West Coast got its own version of the Red and Blue with the creation of the Orange and Gold networks, which largely showed the same programs. Two years later NBC broadcast its signature three-note chime for the first time as a way to present the station identification required by their broadcast license.

[\(See the top 100 TV shows of all time.\)](#)

Almost from the start, however, legal troubles tangled NBC's corporate history. In 1931 antitrust issues forced RCA to split from General Electric; the orphaned company moved into new digs in New York City's Rockefeller Center (which remains its headquarters to this day). Despite a spirited rivalry with fellow broadcasting giant CBS in the golden age of radio, NBC ruled the dial — a supremacy that sparked further antitrust investigations from the newly created Federal Communications Commission. In 1939 the FCC

ordered RCA to spin off NBC entirely; RCA, in a successful effort to avoid this outcome, instead sold off the Blue Network in 1943. It would eventually become the American Broadcasting Company (now known as ABC).

Television would provide NBC with new realms to conquer. The company was an early adopter: it launched some of the first experimental transmissions from the antenna atop the Empire State Building in 1931, and it started regular broadcasts in New York City in 1939, debuting in time for the opening of the World's Fair. The company minted the first TV star in comedian Milton Berle, whose *Texaco Star Theater* became a hit in 1948 — the same year that the number of televisions in America crossed the 1 million mark. NBC started broadcasting in color in 1954; its famed peacock logo was created in 1956 to highlight the medium's newfound richness. By 1965, 95% of NBC's TV broadcasts were in color.

Much of NBC's early DNA can be found in its current programming. Its Sunday-morning stalwart *Meet the Press* was originally a radio program when it was founded in 1947. *The Today Show* was launched on TV in 1952, followed by *The Tonight Show* in 1954. But by the 1970s, many of NBC's other TV offerings had foundered: local affiliates were defecting to competitors CBS and ABC, which were proving deft at luring away younger audiences. The company was bought — again — by General Electric in 1986; the new owners quickly shed NBC's remaining radio operations in part to avoid (you guessed it) antitrust concerns.

The GE acquisition coincided with a change in NBC's fortunes: the mid-1980s found the network regaining its game, debuting *The Cosby Show* in 1984, followed by hits like *The Golden Girls* and *Miami Vice* in 1985. It rode that wave of success well into the 1990s, when the network's famed Must-See TV bloc on Thursday nights, anchored by the smash hits *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, made NBC dominant in the ratings anew.

But in recent years, the sun has not shone as brightly on the peacock. NBC was late to the reality-TV trend, and replacement shows for *Seinfeld* and *Friends* (retired in 1998 and 2004, respectively) never lived up to expectations. And while NBC's cable stations (Bravo, USA and MSNBC, among others) are performing well, the network itself places a consistent fourth in the ratings, making Comcast's job a turnaround one. Its potential plans? Possibly a name change (Comcast Entertainment is rumored) but also an increased emphasis on broadening TV's scope beyond the box itself. Comcast is a cable company, interested in "finding new ways to sell viewers media," according to [TIME's James Poniewozik](#). That means an increased emphasis on online media (NBC owns a share in the Web streaming service Hulu) and the network's cable channels. By most indications, Comcast doesn't plan to tinker with the network's programming. For those hoping Baldwin and company will continue to crack jokes at their new corporate overlords' expense, that's good news indeed.

[See the 10 worst corporate name changes of all time.](#)

[See TIME's Pictures of the Week.](#)

 [Click to Print](#)

**Find this article at:**

<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1945408,00.html>

---

Copyright © 2014 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Add TIME Headlines to your Site](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Customer Service](#)