Middle-Class Viewers and *Breaking Bad*:
Audience and Social Status in the Post-Network Era

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Scripted original series produced by cable networks are more closely associated with post-network era American television's elevated cultural status than any other type of programming. Frequently, cable crime dramas like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) are credited with improving the overall quality of television content. As Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue, however, the discourses associated with television's "cultural legitimation" work to distance contemporary texts and viewing practices from the medium's low-status past. Yet, audience research has largely shied away from addressing such issues. To begin filling this gap in the literature, this article focuses on viewers and their relationship to a single hour-long, prime-time cable crime drama, AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013).

This analysis begins by briefly describing the historical trajectory of prime-time crime drama on American television. Next, this article brings critical audience analysis into conversation with scholarship addressing television's elevated status in the post-network era. After describing the methods used to recruit respondents, and detailing the composition of the sample, viewers responses are presented in conjunction with critical responses to *Breaking Bad*. The findings indicate that there is a relationship between formal education and the acquisition of the knowledge and codes necessary to fully appreciate culturally legitimated crime drama. In particular, "high-status" viewers (defined as those with graduate-level education or high-status white collar occupations) possess the necessary cultural knowledge needed to understand *Breaking Bad* as a narrative of moral transformation and Walter White as a complicated anti-heroic protagonist. Viewers who lack such status markers understand the show and its protagonist as a traditional heroic narrative. Collectively, these findings highlight the ways in which traditional and post-network modes of engagement coexist. This article concludes with a brief consideration of the role technology plays in post-network audience reception

and some thoughts about the future of audience reception research in light of the post-network era programming boom.

Crime Drama as Genre

During the network era (from the early 1950s to the early 1980s), television was a domestic medium (watched at home) with limited content produced by three over-the-air broadcast networks.[1] Responding to the realities of the market, network era producers created content that conformed to the least objectionable programming theory of audience behavior. This approach was largely based on the belief that the absence of objectionable material was more important to the success of a given program than the presence of any other textual features. As a consequence of production guided by this logic, scripted television became a bland medium devoid of social, intellectual, or artistic issues. In this industrial context, NBC's *Dragnet* (1951-1959 and 1967-1970), which began as a radio program, came to define the prime-time crime drama. In this first police procedural, the police officer is depicted as a public hero and, thus, the legitimate arbiter of moral authority. As Jason Mittell notes, "One of the representational strategies that *Dragnet* uses to solidify this worldview is the use of overt binary oppositions, such as law versus crime, order versus chaos, and efficient system versus rogue individualism" (146). Such binaries were consistent with other elements of 1950s culture that served national myths about stability and American contentment. The definitive moral conclusions offered by this show are particularly important because they encourage the ideological belief that large-scale social problems can be meaningfully addressed at the individual, rather than the systemic level (Gitlin). In many ways, it was this ideological fealty to the status quo that characterizes the genre throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Lane).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the narrative focus of crime drama shifted from catching criminals to the daily lives of "ordinary" cops. In moving away from the morally dichotomous model of the earlier police drama, *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987) acquired a degree of cultural legitimacy that had largely been denied television, in general, and crime dramas, in particular. As one of the shows that ushered in what he calls the "second golden age," Thompson claims the show "brought something truly different to prime-time television" (60). Indeed, *Hill Street Blues* was denser and less viewer-friendly than most network-era dramas. More recent shows that rely on this narrative template include *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005) and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999). Although protagonists in these shows are depicted as complex in relation to earlier dramas, police officers remain the legitimate arbiters of moral authority with personal shortcomings thrown in for texture. In *NYPD Blue*, the protagonist, Detective Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz), begins the series as a racist, sexist, alcoholic who perjures himself in open court. Yet, the remainder of the series can largely be understood as a tale of his redemption following a series of tragedies including the deaths of his first wife, his oldest son, and two partners.

If shows like *NYPD Blue* continued the trend towards more complex crime drama that began with *Hill Street Blues*, then network crime drama in the post-network era reflects a reversal. Shows like *NCIS* (CBS, 2003-present) and *CSI* (CBS, 2000-2015) demonstrate that "police series on broadcast networks have largely embraced a mode of storytelling that might be called 'high-concept' television: based on simplified and episodic storylines, distinct visual styles, and the potential for expanding franchises" (Nichols-Pethick 153). Like Todd Gitlin's arguments regarding network era television more broadly, contemporary scholars understand prime-time network crime dramas in ideological terms. In *CSI*, for

example, forensic science generates unambiguous conclusions which ideologically support the notion of the state as the legitimate arbiter of moral authority (Hohenstein). In doing so, the show also denies science's complicated and often conflicting roles in the criminal justice system. Yet, in spite of declining ratings (Stelter), network crime dramas are still produced with the intent of building "coalition" audiences composed of viewers from a variety of demographics.

By the late 1990s, however, the number of available alternatives to traditional network content exploded as cable channels began producing scripted television series intended for niche audiences. Unlike network television which is entirely dependent on revenue from advertisers, cable networks rely on different economic models. As a consequence of these economic realities, cable crime dramas differ from their generic predecessors and their network contemporaries in three significant ways. First, protagonists in cable crime dramas are no longer exclusively agents of the state, like police officers, or pseudo-agents, like private detectives. Second, cable crime dramas are often "anti-heroic" narratives. Among critics, discussions of television's contemporary "golden age" are seemingly inseparable from discussions of the "anti-hero." Typically, the term refers to the central distinction between traditional heroes who lack moral flaws and anti-heroes whose moral flaws are directly related to the unfolding dramatic narrative. Third, post-network cable crime dramas frequently feature serialized narratives. The long-form storytelling and serialized narratives of original cable series are seen as more engaging than the episodic narratives of network procedural dramas.

Yet, there is little empirical research examining the ways in which audiences have responded to generic shifts in the crime drama or how viewers have responded to the medium's elevated status. Furthermore, the value of such work is limited by additional factors. Surveys on media engagement, for example, typically "fail to take account of the possibility of a 'canon,' or hierarchy of television texts" which is particularly problematic given the increasing cultural significance of prime-time cable dramas (Wright 365). In addition, Nielsen ratings, which cannot be considered research in an academic sense (Meehan), are stripped of useful demographic information when published in the television trade press. To move beyond these issues, in the next section, insights from critical audience analysis are considered alongside scholarship addressing post-network legitimating discourses to foreground the ways in which understandings of *Breaking Bad* might vary with viewers' social locations.

Cultural Legitimation and Audience Reception in the Post-Network Era

The most relevant discourses in relation to post-network television's elevated status are the legitimating discourses that align the medium with the traits of more culturally validated forms. According to Newman and Levine, "One of the central strategies employed in discourses of television's legitimation is comparison with already legitimated art forms, such as literature and cinema" (4). They explain:

> Deep immersion in a season of a premium cable drama like *The Sopranos*
> is thus described by analogy to reading a thick nineteenth-century social
> realist novel by Balzac, Dickens, or Tolstoy. But the more ubiquitous
> legitimating strategy is cinematization: certain kinds of television and
> certain modes of experiencing television content are aligned with movies
> and the experience of movies. (5)

As this reference to *The Sopranos* indicates, original series produced by premium cable networks have

accrued more prestige that any other type of programming in the post-network era. Of course, professional critics play a central role in the propagation of legitimating discourses. As "cultural intermediaries" (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 325), critics help create broader social views of what constitutes good or bad television. Furthermore, their approach to evaluating television frequently reflects the dominant cultural hierarchy and its views on mass and popular culture. As legitimating discourses seek to align television with highbrow culture, it becomes possible for middle-class audiences to treat television as a form of cultural capital.

In one sense, doing so necessitates that middle-class audiences understand television as class-appropriate leisure. For example, in her qualitative research exploring the differences between American and French elites, Michele Lamont finds that upper-middle class American men value any "kind of activity that can be read as a signal of self-actualization" (92) including "play[ing] chess, learn[ing] a musical instrument, exercise, diet[ing], go[ing] to the museum, get[ting] involved in the PTA, sav[ing] the rain forest, [and] tak[ing] classes" (99). Furthermore, as an indication of the desire to maximize one's own potential, leisurely engagement with intellectually demanding cultural forms "can be taken to indirectly signal high ranking on the moral, cultural, and socioeconomic status hierarchies" (Lamont 100). This orientation explains, in part, why middle class audiences who once considered television a "passive and mediocre" (Lamont 98) use of leisure time would celebrate "culturally legitimated" post-network television if they believe such content is "'original,' 'edgy,' 'complex,' and 'sophisticated'" (Newman and Levine 81).

In another sense, the increasing status of post-network television allows some content to acquire value that is similar to that of objectified cultural capital. As Pierre Bourdieu explains, the central mechanism by which the privileged activate their culture resources is by converting them into tastes for high status cultural forms (*Distinction*). When these forms are institutionalized within educational systems and consecrated by "cultural intermediaries" such as professional critics, they become "misrecognized" as qualitatively superior and then become imbued with symbolic power. Furthermore, such forms are coded in ways that require knowledge and receptive frameworks to fully enjoy their consumption. As a consequence of such social relations, elites activate "objectified" cultural capital through the consumption of cultural objects that require high "virtual" cultural capital to consume in ways that conform to the views of sanctioned critics (Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital").

Beyond consuming the "right" cultural objects, treating television as a form of cultural capital could also involve middle-class audiences emphasizing the distinctiveness of their consumption practices. A significant body of research asserts that cultural consumption among high-status individuals varies substantially from that of previous eras (Peterson and Kern). According to Douglas Holt, the breakdown of traditional boundaries separating highbrow and lowbrow culture results in the objectified form of cultural capital being supplanted by the embodied form ("Distinction in America"). He explains, "Class differences in American consumption have gone underground; no longer easily identified with the goods consumed, distinction is becoming more and more a matter of practice" (103). Specifically, contemporary forms of embodied cultural capital are reflected in the difference between "critical" and "referential" reception of cultural texts (Holt, "Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?").

Critical reception is more common among individuals with high levels of cultural capital (HCC). Holt notes, "Applying a formal interpretive lens, HCCs read popular entertainment as entertaining fictions that are potentially edifying but that do not reflect directly the empirical world" (Holt, "Does Cultural

Capital Structure American Consumption?" 9). Such readings are similar to the Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz's notion of "critical" interpretations. In their study of cross-cultural interpretations of the prime-time soap opera, *Dallas*, Liebes and Katz find that viewers who offer critical interpretations of the show discuss the program as "a fictional construction with aesthetic rules" (100). In addition, critical interpretation involves "awareness either of the semantic or syntactic elements of the text or of the roles of the reader as processor of the text" (117). By semantic criticism, Liebes and Katz mean that viewers might make an inference about the theme of the program or about the producer's narrative aims, or they might reflect on how a show presents reality. By syntactic criticism, they mean that viewers might be aware of generic conventions, of the dramatic function of characters and narrative events, of the economic realities of television production, of their own responses to the program, or of the program as having been constructed.

In contrast, among individuals with low levels of cultural capital (LCC), the value associated with any and all content is closely related to personal identification. Holt describes this as referential reception that applies a "classificatory system used in everyday life to cultural texts" ("Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?" 9). Referential reception resembles Herbert Gans' notion of the user-oriented public who has little concern for authorship and instead chooses "culture for the feelings and enjoyment it evokes and for the insight and information they can obtain" (104). This public places little stock in critical evaluation instead preferring word-of-mouth judgments from those in their social circles. In addition, referential reception resembles the "middlebrow personalism" Janice Radway finds in her investigation of The-Book-of-the-Month Club during the 1920s and 1930s. In creating a culture that opposed the highbrow imperatives of academics and professionals, the ideological foundation of middlebrow literary culture is the recognition that reading is a highly variable experience. Thus, the club's selections both require and support a worldview in which taste is a reflection of individual, idiosyncratic selves. In the context of referential reception, the importance of individual subjectivity, what one thinks and feels about a given cultural text, leaves little room for externally validated prestige systems. As a result, status hierarchies are not particularly significant for individuals engaging with culture in this fashion. For those attracted to cultural texts that speak directly to their current life situation, the appeal of a given show that feels "real" can neither be diminished by negative critical evaluations nor elevated by positive ones. Following a brief description of methodology, this article uses critical audience analysis to address post-network audience reception among *Breaking Bad* viewers paying particular attention to modes of engagement that align television with highbrow culture (cultural capital) by invoking the discourses of legitimation described by Newman and Levine.

Methods

Respondents were recruited in a mid-sized American city in the mid-Atlantic region as part of a larger project addressing the reception of cable crime drama. Using the distinction between "basic" and "premium" cable shows to facilitate audience reception research by limiting the scope of the analysis, this project examined audience engagement with nine prime-time cable crime dramas: *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *The Closer* (TNT, 2005-2012), *Dexter* (SHO, 2006–2013), *White Collar* (USA, 2007-2013), *Burn Notice* (USA, 2009-present), *Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010-present), *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014), and *Homeland* (SHO, 2011- present). This research did not explicitly recruit viewers of *Breaking Bad*. Yet, as it happens, sixteen of the respondents who were viewers of these various cable crime dramas were also viewers of *Breaking Bad*.[2]

This study was conducted in late 2013. Data collection occurred at a variety of physical locations depending on individual availability and preference. Interviews lasting between sixty and ninety minutes were digitally recorded and transcribed by the author. Field notes were taken after each interview. Interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic text analysis method that combines the use of deductive coding and inductive coding. As all respondents have socioeconomic backgrounds that can be considered middle-class, the sample is divided by educational attainment and occupational status. Individuals with any amount of post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered "high-status" middle-class viewers. Occupations are considered high-status if they have scores above eighty on the Nam–Powers–Boyd Occupational Status Scale (Nam and Boyd). Viewers without post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered "low-status."

It must noted, however, that operationalizing social class for qualitative social scientific research is notoriously difficult. Although the middle-class/working-class divides that informed past efforts were not as neatly separated as they often appeared, recent changes in class structures and broader shifts in the nature of work have further complicated this issue. As such, it is necessary to keep in mind that social class, as categories and as lived experiences, are complex, fluid, and malleable. With these qualifications in mind, the sample includes nine "high-status" viewers and seven "low-status" viewers. Eleven are men and five are women. Fourteen self-identify as white, one self-identifies as Hispanic, and one self-identifies as Asian. Of the nine "high-status" respondents, five have post-graduate degrees. Among the seven "low-status" respondents, only three have earned Bachelor's degrees.

In this sample, only five of the sixteen respondents pay for cable or satellite television at their current residence.[3] The remaining eleven respondents report that they do not watch live television. All sixteen respondents pay for internet access at their current residence although, for many, the expense is included as part of their rent. Fourteen respondents are current Netflix subscribers. For those without legal means of accessing cable crime dramas like *Breaking Bad*, there are a host of less-than-legal means available. The TV-torrent distribution group EZTV, for example, uses web bots to make new television shows available for download within several hours after they first appear. In contrast, Sidereel is a TV show link aggregator that allows audiences to find content that is available through a "livestream." The wide accessibility of post-network television content is one of contemporary television's defining elements. In fact, none of the respondents in this sample reports that access is a consideration when making television choices.

Table 1: "High-status" Respondents			
	Name, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity	Education	Occupation
1	Brian, 26, M, white	MA	copywriter
2	Cindy, 30, F, white	MA	graduate student
3	Jamie, 23, M, white	BA	graduate student
4	Jim, 34, M, white	BA	librarian
5	Josh, 26, M, white	MA	graduate student
6	Louis, 24, M, white	BA	engineer
7	Matt, 26, M, white	MA	graduate student

8	Steve, 34, M, white	MA	scientist
9	Tim, 25, M, white	BA	financial analyst

Table 2: "Low-Status" Respondents		
Name, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity	Education	Occupation
1 Aaron, 27, M, white	HS*	musician
2 Amy, 22, F, Asian	BA	grant administrator
3 Beth, 22, F, white	BA	researcher
4 Gina, 18, F, white	HS*	student
5 Mary, 22, F, Hispanic	HS*	student
6 Rick, 26, M, white	BA	HR specialist
7 Wes, 19, M , white	HS*	student
*some college		

The variety of mechanisms through which these respondents engage with television content reflects a fundamental reality of "convergence culture" (Jenkins). Digital technology renders once distinct media forms indistinct at the level of data (binary code). Before the emergence of digital technology, one could not confuse television and film as media forms. They were produced by different companies. They were distributed by different technology and industrial arrangements. Although there was a degree of overlap, as in the case of movies broadcast on television, nonetheless, film and television remained distinct. In the context of convergence culture enabled by digital technology, such distinctions are less salient. As a result, this research addresses audience reception of content that was initially intended for television audiences. Thus, the specific mechanism by which an individual viewer engages with television content is less significant than the nature of that engagement.

Middle-Class Viewers and *Breaking Bad* as Culturally Legitimated Crime Drama

Largely a cult success at the beginning of its five season run (Deadline Team), at the time of these research interviews several years later, *Breaking Bad* was seemingly inescapable. Walter White, the show's protagonist, begins the series as a mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher.[4] After being diagnosed with cancer, he begins producing and dealing methamphetamine ("crystal meth") to ensure his family's financial security after his death. The show is primarily concerned with White's transformation from every-man to criminal mastermind. *Breaking Bad* showrunner Vince Gilligan describes the protagonist's character development as "a story that takes Mr. Chips and turns him into Scarface.[5] Although *The Sopranos* demonstrated that audiences are willing to stick with anti-heroic protagonists despite morally reprehensible behavior, Tony undergoes little moral development over the course of the series. If anything, he doesn't change at all. In contrast, *Breaking Bad*'s audience watches White become a sociopath. For example, in season one, it takes White several days to build up the

courage to kill Krazy-8, a drug dealer imprisoned by White and his partner, Jesse Pinkman ("Cat's in the Bag . . ."). By the conclusion of the second season, White coldly watches Pinkman's girlfriend Jane drown in her own vomit following a drug overdose ("Phoenix").

Although the show's anti-heroic protagonist is the focal point of the show and its audience, a considerable amount of attention was also given to White's wife, Skyler. Much of this attention, however, was negative. As Anna Gunn, the actress who plays Skyler, wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece during the show's fifth and final season, audience antipathy towards the wet-blanket wife of a beloved protagonist resulted in outright misogyny. Describing the internet vitriol directed at her character, Gunn reports, "A typical online post complained that Skyler was a 'shrieking, hypocritical harpy' and didn't 'deserve the great life she has.' 'I have never hated a TV-show character as much as I hate her,' one poster wrote. The consensus among the haters was clear: Skyler was a ball-and-chain, a drag, a shrew, an 'annoying bitch wife'" (n.p.). Ultimately, Gunn concludes that "most people's hatred of Skyler had little to do with me and a lot to do with their own perception of women and wives. Because Skyler didn't conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female, she had become a kind of Rorschach test for society, a measure of our attitudes toward gender" (n.p.). At the show's conclusion in 2013, in part due to accessibility via Netflix, the show's audience had grown substantially.

This research finds that the reception of *Breaking Bad* as a post-network text and middle-class viewer's understandings of the show's protagonist vary with social location. "High-status" respondents understand the show in the broader context of post-network television. Tim, a twenty-five year-old business owner several years of experience in the financial sector, explicitly compares *Breaking Bad* to another culturally legitimated drama. He says, "I think it's just as entertaining as *The Wire*, it keeps you on as edge just as much *The Wire*, but it's not going to have, for me at least, the long lasting social impact. It's not going to challenge long held beliefs that I've had." When asked to elaborate, Tim continues, "You're basically wrestling with the plight of one character. It's great. It's a lot like *The Sopranos*. One person is carrying it and a lot of how you feel about the show rests solely on how you feel about that character's evolution." Rather than addressing *Breaking Bad* in reference to other culturally legitimated shows, Louis, a twenty-four year-old software engineer, sees the show as situated in a specific post-network context. He says, "I really like *Breaking Bad*. I guess because it is able to make these really awful scenes and somehow actually put them on everyday cable. That's really interesting to me. It's a very intense show, and that's why people get hooked on it." He also invokes legitimating discourses noting, "There's also a lot of literary things that are going on in *Breaking Bad*. There's references to Walt Whitman, but there's something really Kafkaesque about it. There's something also kind of Samuel Beckett about it, especially the episode with the fly." In Louis' comments, audience reception comes to resemble what Shamus Khan describes as the "ease of privilege." In his analysis of an elite prep school, he finds that traditional patterns of cultural consumption among elites have been replaced as students "are taught to move with ease through the broad range of culture, to move with felicity from the elite to the popular" (161). Incorporating Kafka, Whitman, and Beckett into his thoughts about *Breaking Bad*, Louis succeeds at doing just that.

Beyond the ability to move between popular and elite culture, Louis' feelings about "the episode with the fly" touch on other relevant issues. After listing the litany of literary references quoted above, Louis adds, "The episode with the fly could be a play. I really like that episode." The positive attitude toward this specific episode is notable. "Fly" takes place almost entirely within the confines of a meth lab concealed beneath an industrial laundry facility. In a narrative sense, the episode details the process by

which White and Pinkman catch and kill a housefly. This particular episode resulted from *Breaking Bad*'s budgetary restrictions. According to Gilligan, "We were hopelessly over budget . . . And we needed to come up with what is called a bottle episode, set in one location" ("Vineyard").[6] The episode is often described as one of the show's most polarizing. It has been widely praised by critics for its cinematography and directing, and for the dynamic between White and Pinkman. Sepinwall, for example, speculated that "Fly" may be "the best bottle show ever" characterizing the episode as "an instant classic" (n.p.). Among many fans, however, the lack of plot development and heavy-handed symbolism result in declarations of "worst episode ever."[7] In this context, Louis' positive feelings about this episode once again indicate a degree of alignment between "high-status" middle-class audiences and cultural elites like television critics.

Unlike "high-status" middle-class viewers like Tim and Louis, "low-status" respondents understand *Breaking Bad* without reference to broader post-network era television landscape. Rick, a twenty-six year-old working in human resources, says, "If I step back and think about what the actual plot line of *Breaking Bad* it's so insane. [laughs] Somebody once described it as a 'high stakes thriller' and that's the level I watch it on. I'm not too interested in the characters or discussions of morality, or family stuff. It's more just the thrill ride of it I like." Similarly, when asked what he likes about the show, Aaron, a twenty-seven year-old musician, simply says, "It's fun, it's real fun." Among television critics, this type of appreciation is one element associated with the label of the "bad fan." Coined by *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum in response to audience attitudes towards the final season of *Breaking Bad*, she claims, "All shows have them. They're the *Sopranos* buffs who wanted a show made up of nothing but whackings (and who posted eagerly about how they fast-forwarded past anything else)" ("That Mind-Bending Phone Call on Last Night's 'Breaking Bad'" n.p.). Nussbaum goes on to assert that, "some fans are watching wrong." In a later piece, she explains that, "This sort of audience divide, not between those who love a show and those who hate it but between those who love it in very different ways, has become a familiar schism in the past fifteen years" ("The Great Divide: Norman Lear, Archie Bunker, and the Rise of the Bad Fan" n.p.). She continues:

> This is particularly true of the much lauded stream of cable "dark dramas," whose protagonists shimmer between the repulsive and the magnetic. As anyone who has ever read the comments on a recap can tell you, there has always been a less ambivalent way of regarding an antihero: as a hero. Some of the most passionate fans of *The Sopranos* fast-forwarded through Carmela and Dr. Melfi to freeze-frame Tony strangling a snitch with electrical wire. (David Chase satirized their bloodlust with a plot about "Cleaver," a mob horror movie with all of the whackings, none of the Freud.) More recently, a subset of viewers cheered for Walter White on *Breaking Bad*, growling threats at anyone who nagged him to stop selling meth.

Yet, there is little doubt that the "bad fan" label has class connotations.

In fact, in the same column Nussbaum argues that the emergence of the "bad fan" can be traced back to *All in the Family*'s (CBS, 1971-1979) racist, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, and homophobic working-class buffoon and stereotypical head of the sitcom household Archie Bunker. Bunker is particularly relevant for discussions of the anti-hero in TV's third golden age because *All in the Family*'s creator Norman Lear has famously claimed that the character was supposed to be hated by audiences who were

believed to be increasingly socially liberal. Yet, as one sitcom historian observes, audiences liked Bunker but, "Not in an ironic way, not in a so-racist-he's-funny way; Archie was TV royalty because fans saw him as one of their own" (Austerlitz 114). Furthermore, at the conclusion of the article, Nussbaum invokes the binary between active and passive viewing before lauding shows that encourage active engagement, "There's a lot to be said for a show that is potent without being perfect, or maybe simply perfect for its moment: storytelling that alters the audience by demanding that viewers do more than just watch."

Referencing Nussbaum's position, Matt Zoller Seitz, an equally highbrow critic who writes for *New York Magazine*'s online shingle *Vulture*, writes:

> If you seek to deny or minimize the parts of art that don't fit your reductive interpretation of Walt as a basically decent man, or a man who moves with a purpose and is somehow "badass," as opposed to the complex monster the show has actually presented over five seasons, you are in fact, as Nussbaum wrote in her piece on the scene, watching the show wrong. In fact, you're trying to turn a smart show into a stupid one. And you really should ask yourself why. (n.p.)

This comment contains both the legitimating discourses associated with post-network television ("art") as well as more traditional archetypes of class-based distinction including assumptions regarding the "bad" fan's lack of intellectual capabilities ("reductive interpretation") and admiration of machismo ("'badass'"). In addition, Zoller Seitz accuses such audience members of perverting a celebrated text ("you're trying to turn a smart show into a stupid one") and exhorts them to engage in a bout of self-reflexive assessment ("you really should ask yourself why") which is itself class-specific behavior. Among the respondents interviewed for this research, none offered reductive interpretations in line with this conception of the "bad fan." However, like the understandings of the show itself, understandings of *Breaking Bad*'s protagonist also vary with class status.

"High-status" middle-class young-adults offer characterizations similar to Zoller Seitz's "complex monster." Brian, a twenty-six year-old copywriter at an online marketing firm, claims that over the course of the series, White "was slowly admitting that [his criminal activity] wasn't for his family. It was for [himself]. [He] loved it and [he] was so happy. I feel like you [as the viewer] feel the tension. He was finally being happy and finally 'breaking bad' and living freely, but he also lost his life and destroyed his family." As Brian notes here, *Breaking Bad*'s narrative ends with the death of its protagonist. The series' final scene, White collapses with a fatal gunshot wound in a super-lab he helped build with a look of satisfaction on his face as federal agents storm the building ("Felina"). Although he succeeded in providing financial security for his family, by the conclusion of the series he is estranged from them. In fact, Brian understands the show through this framework. He says, "That's how the whole show is torn. The whole show is torn by him discovering himself and also destroying other peoples' lives. I thought it was awesome and fun to watch the ending." Josh, a twenty-six year old graduate student with a master's degree in psychology, offers a similar interpretation. He understands *Breaking Bad* to be a show that has "been turning the hero into the villain." He explains, "It's really a test to see how long you going to stay with this guy you've kind of been complacently conditioned to always root for, no matter what." Here, Josh offers a critical interpretation reflecting awareness of the semantic elements of the show (Liebes and Katz 117) as his comments include inferences regarding *Breaking Bad*'s thematic elements and the intentions of the show's creators.

In contrast, "low-status" viewers interpret White in unilateral terms. Wes, a nineteen year-old undergraduate, finds "a basically decent man" saying, "I really like the fact that Walter White stands up for his family, and is doing anything for his family. I just admire that characteristic of Walter. He's stubborn to help his family, even though he has cancer." This celebration of a protagonist's commitment to family resembles the understanding of heroes within "lower-middle culture" who typically accept the validity of traditional institutions (Gans 111). Yet, in this instance, to embrace White for his loyalty to his family requires that one ignores the damage the character brings to other families. In line with referential reception, Mary, a nineteen year-old community college students, offers an opposing but equally unilateral reading. She says, "Every decision that Walter, especially, makes is something I wouldn't do or couldn't imagine myself doing. I don't really think that people deserve to die in general, but if there is anyone that deserves to die, it probably could be him." Quite clearly, Mary relates to White as a real person and in turn relates this real person to her own real world (Liebes and Katz 100). Taken together, "low-status" middle-class viewers readings of *Breaking Bad* do not exalt White the "badass." Nonetheless, they do not offer nuanced takes on a "complex monster." Rather, their discussions of *Breaking Bad*'s anti-heroic protagonist lack the conflicted moral allegiance typically associated with viewer attachment to such characters. For these middle-class viewers, there is a disconnect between the protagonist's moral ambiguity that is encoded into this post-network crime drama and the decoding schema which understands this particular character as if he were a traditional network era television hero. It is one thing to "root for the bad guy," as the saying goes, but it is quite another to root for a sociopath as the embodiment of virtue.

Conclusion

Using interviews with sixteen middle-class viewers, this article claims that the significance of post-network television's increasing cultural status varies with, but is not determined by, social location. Unlike earlier research addressing middle-class American television audiences (Press), the data presented above identifies significant variation among middle-class viewers. Among "high-status" viewers, those with any amount of post-graduate education or a high-status occupation, *Breaking Bad* is frequently conceptualized as a form of cultural capital. This finding differs rather dramatically from Lamont's observation that television is a devalued leisure activity among upper-middle-class American men. If watching television was once outside the realm of middle-class appropriate behavior because of its association with a lack of intelligence and intellectual curiosity, then, the social processes of post-network era television's cultural legitimation have mitigated the significance of such associations and some kinds of television have become middle-class appropriate. For middle-class viewers with less status, however, *Breaking Bad* is understood as another television show whose value is unrelated to critical acclaim or the lack thereof. Perhaps then, it should not be entirely surprising that the reception practices associated with "low-status" viewers are loudly derided by cultural elites who enact and reproduce status hierarchies.

In a broader cultural context, this article also demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the relationship between cultural consumption and social class. When addressing social class in America, these issues are further complicated by the American tendency to claim middle-class status as the normative identity. Yet, this work begins to connect the broader social processes through which objects and knowledge become cultural capital with the specific practices and discursive resources that allow class symbols, knowledge, and identities to be constructed as meaningful. In contrast to fan studies research

which examines communities of consumption in relation to specific texts, this article adds to the growing body of television studies scholarship that understands watching TV as behavior situated within the new media environment created by digital technology (Tryon and Dawson). Moving away from notions of the audience defined by fan productivity, this work opens a new direction for empirical study within television's increasingly fragmented landscape.

Paradoxically, many of the issues associated with the emergence of television as a form of new media remained on the periphery while conducting this analysis. Although the majority of respondents in this sample are Netflix subscribers, it seems the few who are not are sufficiently adept at navigating digital technology that access was a non-issue. As a corollary to access, issues related to mobile viewing also were not significant for the respondents in this sample. The ability to watch "anytime, anywhere" was largely taken-for-granted. No respondents reported watching television content on their cell phones. Tablets, laptop and desktop computers were discussed interchangeably. Engaging with streaming services on a computer or through a television with an additional device like Google's Chromecast or Amazon's Fire TV Stick (auxiliary devices that plug-in to a digital television's HDMI port) was not a meaningful distinction. Given the declining profitability of home video (Lieberman), the absence of DVDs in middle-class viewers discussions of post-network television is not particularly surprising. Collectively, these respondents engagement with *Breaking Bad* as a manifestation of television as new media seem to point to the old industry saying that "content is king." As a rare point of continuity with network era television, middle-class viewers' engagement with this post-network crime drama is driven by their desire to engage with a particular show, personalities, etc., rather than driven by a desire to engage with television through a particular platform or in a particular (cultural or physical) space.

Nonetheless, there are reasons to suspect that the significance of content is declining as the radical expansion of content choices in the post-network era ensure that producers are fighting for ever slimmer slices of the audience. Since 1999, the number of scripted series produced for cable channels has increased by 1000% (Littleton). In 2014, more than seventeen hundred series aired during prime-time (Goodman). Furthermore, without considering digital outlets, at least 350 new and returning series have been ordered for 2015's television production cycle. Despite audience fragmentation and increasingly diverse content that spreads across platforms, however, the idea of television still has a significant amount of cultural currency. Netflix, a digital content provider rather than a traditional television network, continues to market its products as television. Amazon, a company original built to deliver physical goods to consumers' homes, does the same. Although industrial and economic changes have destroyed the traditional television calendar and new shows now appear year-round, Netflix tells subscribers about "seasons" of its political drama *House of Cards*. In addition, with serialized narratives and viewers who now "binge watch" streaming video, Netflix still organizes it content into roughly thirty or sixty minute chunks it calls "episodes." Similarly, YouTube allows users and producers to organize content into "channels."

Ultimately, the future of television audience research depends upon qualitative scholars' willingness to expand the kinds of material that constitute data. Critical audience analysis in the post-network era has the potential to make significant contributions to scholarly understandings of meaning-making within the context of a convergence culture. Yet, to do so, the obsessive concern with the productive activities of media consumers must be replaced with a more diffuse focus on the multiplicity of ways in which individuals do or do not engage with digital media. By using methodological techniques including content analysis, cyber-ethnography, close reading, and "passing ethnography" (Couldry) as supplements to traditional audience research, for example, qualitative data gathered from online fans,

professional television critics and media academics can all be understood to reflect broader shifts in the reception practices of post-network audiences.

Such methodological triangulation would create opportunities for media studies to return to the audience-centered analysis that helped define the field while also providing a much needed complimentary perspective to the glut of contemporary scholarship addressing media industries. Using integrated conceptions of cultural engagement rather than defining consumption in terms of specific media systems or cultural forms, critical audience analysis focusing on television reception can make significant contributions to our understanding of the relationship between digital media and categorical identity (race, class, and gender) by examining the ways in which individuals move through increasingly media social worlds without the exaggerated emphasis on notions of "users" or other forms of the hyperactive consumer.

Notes

[1] The term "network" has multiple connotations in relation to American television. The phrase "network television," for example, typically refers to the "big three" commercial broadcast (over-the-air) television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) that dominated American television between the early 1950s and the late 1980s. In this usage, the term "network" distinguishes free, over-the-air television from fee-based, cable television. Yet, when used in the phrase "television network," the term describes any channel. In this case, both NBC and CNN are television networks despite their differing economic and technological foundations.

[2] Like the larger project which argues that the central narrative unit of crime dramas the post-network era is the season, here respondents are defined as viewers if they report watching a minimum of two complete seasons of *Breaking Bad*.

[3] This is not representative of the American television audience. More than 90% of American households pay for cable or satellite television service (Bajaj) which typically costs $90 per month (Manjoo).

[4] The character's "everyman" identity is further supported by the actor chosen to play White. Prior to *Breaking Bad*, Bryan Cranston was most familiar to television audiences for his role as Hal, the father in the family sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*.

[5] "Mr. Chips" is a reference to Mr. Chipping, a beloved school teacher, who is the protagonist in the novella *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* which was adapted for both film and television. "Scarface" is a reference to either the 1932 movie inspired by the life of Al Capone or the 1983 film remake of the same name in which Capone is replaced by a Cuban immigrant turned drug dealer named Tony Montana.

[6] The episode saved $25,000-35,000 which was the sum required to move production trucks to a new location (Sepinwall).

[7] The phrase "worst episode ever" is a reference to fans' hyperbolic responses to content they find disappointing which are often expressed online. The phrase itself is a reference to *The Simpsons*.

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