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David C. Lane

TELEVISION

The relationship between television and the American middle class is complicated. This complexity is apparent when considering television's cultural status and research addressing middle-class television audiences. This entry discusses the complex nature of this relationship and concludes with a brief consideration of the probable future of the relationship between television and the American middle class.

The Cultural Status of American Television

Throughout most of its history, television has been a low-status cultural form. This low status is apparent in the devaluation of television technology, television content, and television audiences. During the network era (from the early 1950s to the early 1980s), television was a domestic medium, watched primarily at home, with limited content produced by three over-the-air broadcast networks. In addition, this limited content was only available at specific times as determined by the schedules of broadcast networks. In comparison to film, television had long been conceived as technologically deficient as the limitations of the cathode-ray tube resulted in poor picture quality. The limitations of over-the-air broadcast technology resulted in inconsistent signal reception.

Regarding content, television programming has been consistently marginalized as commercial and anesthetizing. Responding to the realities of the market, network era producers created content that conformed to the least objectionable programming theory of audience behavior. This strategy 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 an extremely bland medium, emphatically devoid of social, intellectual, or artistic issues. Even when producers began moving away from the least objectionable content model and "quality" shows like *Hill Street Blues* (1981–1987) led some television scholars to declare the emergence of a "second golden age," members of the cultural elite continued to blame television for a variety of social ills including the absence of meaningful public discourse (Postman 1985) and declining levels of civic engagement (Putnam 2000).

Despite this generalized disdain for television programming, beginning with the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960, most scholars recognized the political importance of television. Until the decline of the audience for television news in the 1980s and beyond, the network nightly news performed an important function of cultural unification given that its audience included a large percentage of the American populace.

As a corollary to the devaluation of television technology and its fictional content, television audiences have been maligned as passive, lazy, vulgar, or stupid. As one scholar observes, "Behind many critiques of the medium as exploitative, sensational, trivial, and inane lies an unacknowledged disdain for an audience that is deemed infantile and feminine" (Joyrich 1996, 22). Members of the college-educated middle classes, the "chattering class of *New York Times* readers" often distanced themselves from television audiences by proclaiming that they did not own a television (Lotz 2014, 64). Nonetheless, there is reason to believe any number of such claims were false. By 1965, 94 percent of American households owned a television (Bump 2011). By 1980, TV ownership had increased to 98 percent and remained steady for the next 20 years.

Given the low status of television technology, its fictional content, and audiences, the relationship between television and the American middle class only began to change in the wake of several industrial and technological shifts. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of cable networks increased the amount of available content. This period is frequently described as the "multichannel" transition. There was a dramatic increase in the amount of content producers needed for an ever-expanding number of advertiser-supported cable channels. At the same time, devices like the VCR gave audiences a measure of control over scheduling. Nonetheless, network era norms remained dominant.

In the late 1990s, American television entered the "postnetwork" era as the television viewing experience and television content fundamentally changed. The increasingly widespread adoption of "time-shifting" technologies like the digital video recorder (DVR) transformed the experience of watching television. Viewers who once engaged with a continuous flow of program content determined by the networks over which they had no control became able to engage with individual programs that could be recorded, saved, and re-viewed at will. At the same time, the number of available alternatives to traditional network content exploded as cable channels began producing scripted television series. It is difficult to overstate the impact of these changes. In this context, cable dramas like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad* are often credited with improving the overall quality of television content.

During this period the audience for television news declined dramatically with the explosion of alternative news sources, primarily on the Internet. At the same time, alternative news formats emerged, including *MTV News*, and night-time satirical news shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Though the audiences for these shows remained relatively small, they were culturally influential to a degree belied by their ratings (Williams & Delli Carpini 2011).

Research Addressing Middle-Class Television Audiences

Unlike the cultural status of television, which until recently had remained rather stable, research addressing middle-class audiences and their relationships to television is complex and varied. Using data gathered from interviews with working-class

and middle-class women from the San Francisco area in the mid-1980s, Press (1991) finds significant differences in terms of television reception that cannot be neatly characterized as high or low brow. Focusing primarily on the ways in which women are represented in television content and how these different groups of women respond to such programs, nonetheless, this research reveals substantive class differences. These middle-class viewers are affected primarily through the process of identifying with both the glamorous, sexually provocative female characters and the more traditional nurturing ones despite finding television to be largely unrealistic. A decade later, Seiter (1999) finds middle-class audience members largely conceptualize television as "lowliest of media" and tend to "compare their own television viewing to that of the imagined mass audience, one that is more interested, more duped, more entertained, more gullible than themselves" (131). In particular, members of the middle class without high levels of educational attainment express defensiveness when admitting to watching television because of its historical association with feminine passivity, laziness, and the masses.

The most recent research addressing middle-class audiences examines the ways in which reception has been impacted by the proliferation of original programming on cable networks and the emergence of digital technologies. Based on qualitative interviews with 50 middle-class young adults (ages 18–34), Wayne (2016) argues that the significance of this "golden age" varies with, but is not determined by, social location. For some middle-class young adults, engagement with postnetwork television includes the creation of symbolic boundaries in relation to the perceived quality of a given show's "writing," the use of culturally legitimated content as bonding capital, and the use of low-status content as bridging capital. For other middle-class young adults, engagement with postnetwork television is characterized by the irrelevance of emerging status hierarchies and the continuing significance of personal identification. The author argues that attitudes toward legitimated content in the postnetwork era are meaningful precisely because significant differences in reception practices are identified within the American middle class.

Moving Forward

Midway through 2015 and well into the second decade of the postnetwork era, the relationships that once defined the American middle class and television as a cultural institution are no longer as dominant as they once were. Television consumption is no longer exclusively a domestic experience. There is evidence that "TV everywhere," referring to authenticated viewing of broadcast shows from channels one subscribes to on a cable or satellite network, is approaching mainstream use and is growing faster than other online video sources like YouTube and Hulu. Between 2013 and 2014, for example, TV everywhere engagement rose by 246 percent (Adobe Digital Index 2014, 3). Beyond dislocating viewers from the physical environment traditionally associated with television, viewers have dislocated themselves from the constraints of network scheduling. In 2013, nearly half of all American homes had a DVR (Wilcox 2013). At the beginning of this year,

research found that more than three-quarters of American households have a DVR, subscribe to Netflix, or use On-Demand (VOD) from a cable or telecommunications provider (Leichtman Research Group 2015). As such, there are significant reasons to expect that the relationship between television and the American middle class will continue to shift and expand to include a greater diversity of content and modes of engagement

See also: *Mad Men*; Media Representation; Movies

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Michael L. Wayne and Andrea L. Press

The American Middle Class

An Economic Encyclopedia of Progress and Poverty

Volumes 1 & 2

ROBERT S. RYCROFT, EDITOR

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