

# Considering Contemporary Television's Ideological Power

Taylor Nygaard, University of Denver

This round table question was inspired by the research Jorie Lagerwey and I have been doing for our book *Horrible White People: Gendering Television's Precarious Whiteness*. The book traces a programming trend we've been watching over the past several years that we call Horrible White People shows—prestige comedies that foreground a supposedly precarious, threatened middle-class whiteness. Situating the run of these shows in the conjuncture of significant culture shifts and changes in TV production and distribution models, we theorize the cycle as emblematic or illustrative of the complicity of the white left, obsessed with its own anxiety and suffering, in the political and cultural rise of the far right during this same time period. In other words, these programs, despite each of them separately having a relatively small audience, together carry a great deal of ideological power. So while the question posits the difficulty of finding mass shared reference points—for example the ability to walk into a classroom and know that every one of your students will have seen last night's episode of X, Y, or Z—we argue that by studying chunks of TV programming together—cycles, trends, networks, or genres—we see the continued function of the medium in all its technological and distribution diversity as a mass ideological force.

We began work on this project in the middle of Donald Trump's nasty and divisive 2016 US Presidential campaign when we started to see thematic parallels between Trump's rhetoric of white victimhood and the anti-immigrant language of the Brexit campaign. At the same time, an abundance of cynical, emotionally brutal series proliferated on narrowcast and streaming networks featuring twenty- and thirty-something white people, self-proclaimed liberals, navigating faltering romance, friendship, marriage and career in this era of cultural crisis and so-called white precarity. This programming cycle includes a plethora of transatlantic television programs like *Casual*, *Catastrophe*, *Love*, *Fleabag*, *Better Things*, *You're the Worst*, *UnReal*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, *Difficult People*, and many others that emerged mostly between 2014 and 2016 and are already disappearing from the TV schedule as we write this.

As the strategic products of contemporary streaming platforms and narrowcast or cable networks in a highly competitive television environment, HWP shows target small, so-called quality audiences and reflect their target demographics in their casting and aesthetic choices. Many of them are created with an explicitly international market in mind (a trend that extends to other prestige television as in, for example, the HBO/Sky Atlantic distribution partnership). To court quality audiences through programming strategies of “not TV,” unlike traditional sitcoms' focus on utopian families or workplace or friendship families, HWP shows challenge generic traditions and take on elements of dystopia or failed romance, frequently critiquing hegemonic ideologies of family instead of reinforcing them. We argue that these programs function as an ideological unit,

ultimately foregrounding race and identity by centralizing the plight of well-meaning white characters newly confronted with undeniable evidence of racial and economic inequality, but unwilling to sacrifice their own comfort to support other's civil rights. It is their stories, and the cultural weight of their stories taken together as a collection of similar programs, that re-center whiteness on television, and contribute to the social, political, and representational milieu in both the US and the UK that has supported the rise of the right and contributes to sustaining the structural white supremacy at its core.

But, in the course of writing and sharing our research we have been trying to grapple with the fact that this cycle is a result of the contemporary television industry targeting smaller and more fragmented audiences. So much so that often when we talk to people about this project, they've never heard of most of the programs we analyze or have only seen one or two of them. We proposed this roundtable because we are wondering whether this cycle of shows can reflect and shape the ideological tensions of this historical conjuncture if mass audiences aren't watching them? We think so but want to discuss the limits and affordances of television as a cultural forum in this moment. We believe that network and industry discourses marking these programs as "prestige" or "quality," their dominance at industry awards shows like the Emmys, and the sheer quantity of them across a variety of networks and streaming platforms bespeaks their ideological influence and the industry's investment in their themes, whether mass audiences are watching them or not. And, furthermore, our contention is that while this cycle of programming seems different, distinct or separate from the rise in partisan niche programming like Breitbart News, which increasingly fragmented audiences consume in their own self-curated bubbles of agreeable programming, there are nonetheless striking ideological similarities (here of white victimhood) across broader television and media content that need to be interrogated in order for us to fully understand the ideological forces shaping public opinion in this divisive and contentious political climate.