

# Considering Contemporary Television's Ideological Power

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From its inception, television has been embedded in the social and material realities of everyday life. The shared public experience of network television depended on the post-war economy's sizeable middle class to purchase television sets. It also depended on industrial work schedules that offered the growing middle class shared leisure time. Today, forces of de-industrialization and casualization of the labor force have led to growing income inequality as well as non-standard and variable work schedules. It should not surprise us that viewing publics are increasingly fragmented and asynchronous. We should not overstate this shift. The cultural forum has expanded beyond the presumed boundaries of its original medium so that series of diffuse, linked cultural fora now make up televisual culture.

Neither the cultural significance of television nor the power of the television industry is imperiled by recent technological developments. Broadcast television and social media appear to compete for our attention, but television and its allied media have a symbiotic relationship that can best be described as an attention-industrial complex. On social media, television producers can now promote their content even when people are not in front of their television sets. Instant viewing services help keep viewers connected to programs outside of the confines of a network viewing schedule. Viewers can now spend significantly more of their leisure time on the television they want to watch. The attention-industrial complex as a whole benefits when we devote more of our time and attention to participating in televisual culture.

Time is therefore one of the most precious assets in the attention economy and viewers seem aware of the economic value of their attention. "What should I watch next?" is the most important question. The decision is political, cultural, affective and material. When viewers invest their time, they expect returns on their investment: something that reflects shared experiences, tastes and politics. One important consideration for many people is which shows will best enhance their existing social relationships. Someone might want to contribute to the water-cooler discussions at their workplace or live tweet along with friends. Fans sometimes even use social media to connect to producers and make demands about the direction of a show. Commitment to any show is provisional and subject to continuous re-evaluation. The precarity of our attention mirrors the precarious employment situations that characterize our working lives.

When a show fails to meet expectations, alternatives are instant available for consideration. Contemporary viewing technologies provide an illusion of personalization and consumer empowerment. What they really offer is an overwhelming amount of content. The sheer volume creates a need to prioritize content and curate user experience. For example, on an allegedly personalized Netflix home

page the only two visible categories are “Popular on Netflix” and “Trending Now;” the search function is hidden from view. We are meant to believe that data and analytics are driving a sophisticated profile of our personal tastes. Yet, the varying algorithms point viewers back toward the same already successful programs with widespread appeal to mainstream audiences. Many television shows produced today use formulaic narratives repackaged just enough for each “niche” market. The scenarios, themes and characters are recycled over and over again. As a result, the fragmentation of audiences has not entirely deprived society of shared cultural referents.

The rules of the battle are changing rapidly, but the stakes are the same: representation, culture and the future. We should carefully analyze, but not overstate the effects of recent technological advances. These shifts do not nullify the foundational concepts of Television Studies. It may require that we re-examine disciplinary assumptions and boundaries in order to build on those concepts.