

Programming choices have never been greater, and so the need for navigators and interpreters has never been greater. The biggest daily challenge for a TV critic is choosing, from the hundreds of options, the one program to write about – finding a gem among the junk and directing readers to it. As much fun as it can be to lay in to a crappy show, I think the greatest service a TV critic can do is to direct time-starved, choices-rich readers to the non-crap, and I include lots of very popular network programs in that category.

My newspaper chooses to focus its TV coverage on local angles, ever more so since Hurricane Katrina. It's what I spend 90 percent of my time doing, and it seems to resonate with Times-Picayune subscribers, who have bucked the trend of abandoning their daily newspaper. The Times-Picayune has the highest readership penetration of any paper in the country, probably because it long ago learned the importance of relentless localism, a philosophy that many larger papers seem to be just discovering. It guides my topic choices every day, and though it limits the time I can spend on traditional reviews of network shows, there are always ample opportunities to pursue local angles in every kind of TV genre.

As for other challenges for the larger community of TV critics, the interface with broadcast networks has changed in the time I've done this job, and the relationship, once a kind of professional stand-off, has turned more hostile as broadcast network viewership, and newspaper circulation totals, have fallen. The publicity transaction that once occurred between networks and critics has changed in several ways, most recently, and most suddenly, in the longstanding network practice of allowing critics to preview programs before they air. This fall, fewer than half of the premier episodes for new shows were made available to most traditional critics before fall-preview package deadlines. The networks say that disruptions in the production cycle caused by the Writers Guild of America strike is the culprit, but there appears to be a willful effort to bypass critics and let marketing experts do their work. (Or just put the series premieres online in advance and let the viewers build buzz for themselves, a gambit that didn't do much for "K-Ville.")

It's too early to say whether this tactical shift is working, but my guess is that the apparent critical blackout will hurt good shows more than shelter bad shows. Critics have played a role in popularizing and sustaining dozens of marginally-rated shows throughout TV history, and that will be less likely if there are no advance episodes to fall in love with and champion.

Mainstream TV critics still serve the broadest possible (though admittedly aging) audience, with tastes ranging from CBS's procedurals to the CW's latest teen drama. Throw in the growing choices from cable-network original programming, PBS and cable news, and there's very little time, or space, to cover the explosion of sometimes very good original programming now being distributed online. My sense is that the newspaper-reader demographic isn't yet attuned to these options. I don't know many critics who spend a lot of time writing about those new programming options, probably to our peril. If broadband penetration continues to grow, and if a simple, intuitive, set-top solution is devised to easily transfer Internet content to living-room TV sets in average households, that equation may change. There's no question a video-content revolution is underway on laptops all over the world, and after-airdate online streaming and downloads of network programming is just a small part of it. Writing about these changes -- as well as technological upheaval like the looming transition to broadcast digital television -- in ways that a broad newspaper readership can appreciate is a daily struggle. Doing it in an engaging, enlightening, entertaining fashion is even harder.

To most TV critics I know, the growth of online-only outlets for TV criticism and coverage is less a threat than an opportunity -- and a lot more work. Most of our editors understand the need for ink-on-paper publications to rapidly expand into cyberspace, which in most cases means more typing using arms and hands that already suffer from repetitive-stress injuries. Blogging by mainstream critics comes on top of whatever is produced for their newspapers and magazines. Some of us have taken to it better than others, but almost all of us are taking to it -- or else. That there are more words by more people to read about TV isn't a negative, though I doubt the blogosphere has much of an influence on the opinions and tastes of traditional, established critics.

A few final words about numbers: Membership in the Television Critics Association, founded 30 years ago, has held steady over the past few years at about 220, even as the newspaper industry has sharply contracted. In the old days, newspaper-employed critics once made up a majority of the TCA's membership, and that's still true. But more online-only critics join every year. The TCA was organized primarily to shape and oversee the execution of the twice-annual TV Tour in Los Angeles, attendance at which declined in July, but only slightly. There's still a vibrant corps of professionals out there dedicated to covering television. Though some daily newspapers may be abandoning the navigator role they've served since TV's inception by eliminating critic jobs, the medium of television is as pervasive,

unsettling, stupefying, invigorating, enraging, thrilling, boring and brilliant as ever.

Critical surveillance will continue, whether newspapers commission it or not.