

TV and Fragmentation: Interrogating Alternative Television Texts
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Scholars continue to debate whether the concept of a unified mass audience for network television was a myth, an industrial construct, or a democratic imperative. These questions persist because they challenge scholars to rethink the presumed "givens" of the past while also providing a framework within which to examine the undeniable fragmentation of the television audience today.

In my study of TV Guide magazine, for example, I explore how the magazine has struggled to reinvent itself as a "post-network era" publication while its mass audience of 17 million has dwindled to just over 3 million readers. TV Guide Inc.'s recent history, including repeated mergers, investments in new media technology, and modifications to both the look and content of the magazine itself, offers a unique case study to consider key debates within television studies, including the function of television within the public sphere and the question mark surrounding the future of network television itself.

Since the 1980s, the industrial foundations of the network television model have been transformed by the expansion of cable programming and by the birth of the World Wide Web. TV Guide magazine has been no less impacted by these tremendous changes. Public statements issued by executives at TV Guide over the last fifteen years highlight an internal struggle within the company. The primary question revealed in this industrial discourse is as follows: what is the relationship of TV Guide magazine to the new methods of distribution offered by the Internet? Conflicting statements in the press highlight the difficulty for print and television media companies to adapt to the new media landscape of the digital age.

Following TV Guide Inc.'s merger with Prevue Channel in 1996, corporate attention to the magazine leveled off as the company shifted its focus to web-based guidance and the TV Guide television network. The company's redirected energies left the magazine a relatively static paean to the past, appealing to an aging and increasingly narrow audience raised on network television. An additional merger in 2000 with Gemstar International sparked another corporate shift as the combined Gemstar-TV Guide Inc. capitalized on Gemstar's many technology patents to dominate the Interactive Programming Guide market. Through these years of corporate convergence, TV Guide's primary mission of television guidance remained unchanged. Yet the print publication that made "TV Guide" a household name became increasingly marginalized in a constantly expanding media landscape.

In May 2008, Macrovision Solutions Corporation purchased Gemstar-TV Guide. Shortly thereafter, the merged corporation announced that it was selling several sectors of the former Gemstar-TV Guide, including the magazine and the cable television channel. Quite telling is that Macrovision intends to maintain the website tvguide.com, seemingly severing the site's partnership with the magazine's editorial content and suggesting that the site will concentrate upon video content in the future. As a technology company, Macrovision's divestment of TV Guide magazine makes business sense. Yet this decision nonetheless raises an intriguing question—for what sort of company would purchasing TV Guide make any business sense in the contemporary media landscape?

TV Guide is not the only print publication to suffer a decrease in readership in the age of the internet. For example, Time Inc., the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times have all announced substantial layoffs in the last two years. Yet TV Guide's

decline carries additional significance for television studies scholars because it reflects the changing television landscape. Its declining subscription base parallels the diminishing pull of network primetime television. Its efforts to remain profitable echo those of broadcasters struggling to attract advertisers and negotiate a relationship with the web.

Though TV Guide magazine has maintained a base of at least three million subscribers for the last few years, alternative guidance tools on the web and through software applications like IPG provide similar if not superior functionality for television viewers. Americans want television guidance, but they may access myriad tools to satisfy this need. Perhaps a similar parallel can be drawn with network television. Consider the appeal of the Olympics, which drew a total of 214 million viewers to NBC Universal, including both the broadcast and cable channels affiliated with NBC. Televised programs on traditional network television maintain the ability to attract a large audience. Yet calculations of their audiences that include alternative distribution sites including cable, DVR usage, and Internet programming demonstrate that a societal need for a shared cultural experience persists. By interrogating alternative discourses, including those of journalism and new media, television scholars may discover that television's social function, though dispersed across the media spectrum, is alive and well.

