

My interest in television studies centers primarily on what the Encyclopedia of Television calls, "activist television," and what I think of as "alternative television." Alternative media scholars have typically defined alternative television in shorthand as being against the mainstream. We delineate the "mainstream" along several vectors, including content, aesthetics, production and distribution practices, and conceptualizations of audience. Over the years, I've flip flopped on whether I like the binary of mainstream/alternative and on how well I think it describes the wide realm of video production that exists outside of commercial broadcast and cable television. A few longitudinal and historical studies of alternative media have made me think, however, that this distinction has value. Much alternative media seems to be in a continuously evolving and mutually influential relationship with mainstream media. Alternative media presents ideological and aesthetic challenges and fills in some of the gaping content gaps of mainstream media. The mainstream media, for their part, selectively absorb and co-opt the agendas and even innovations of alternative media.

I've also thought about whether the Internet will fundamentally change the hegemonic power of mainstream television, and possibly make exposure to alternative media so ubiquitous that the concept becomes obsolete. At present, the Internet is a relatively open and accessible medium for the distribution and exhibition of video work. The Internet enables alternative video makers to stream or webcast productions of any length and their audiences to search for productions by indexed keywords. The Youtube phenomenon shows that ordinary people have a strong interest in disseminating self-produced videos and that micro-audiences exist for just about any kind of subject, genre or style of work. Yet, several factors temper my optimism about the Internet's ability to provide longstanding alternatives to mainstream media practices. These include: the limited time people have to seek information, people's tendency to go to familiar and trusted sources for news and entertainment, the paucity of successful and sustainable business models for some of the most popular Internet applications, the reliance of many popular applications on the illegal circulation of copyrighted content, and the growing assertions by network owners, service providers, and others that they are the only ones with the right to speak over the technologies they own. As a technology, the Internet has yet to develop a sustainable political economy or regulatory systems, and media policy activists are fighting an uphill battle to preserve its open, accessible and equitable beginnings. Making conclusions about the Internet's social impact on mainstream culture now may be like making conclusions about the impact of radio in the early 1920s.

Clearly, the television audience has been dissipating, but television still reaches more adults and consumes far more of their time than any other medium. According to a 2006 Gallup poll of average daily media use, adults viewed television 265 minutes per day, listened to radio 126 minutes, were on the Internet 85 minutes, and spent only 29 minutes with newspapers and 16 minutes with books. In the US, commercial television still tells the most stories to the most people most of the time. And while audiences fragment and distribution platforms multiply, without policy intervention the same political economic imperatives that help shape television are likely to gain influence over the Internet or any other technology capable of disseminating video. These developments suggest that some of the most important questions in television studies may be how evolving political economic constraints affect the major content producers, how business practices are changing as audiences and content migrate to other distribution venues, the role of content originating on television in developing and attracting audiences to other distribution platforms, and what the early history of the medium can tell us about the social construction of communication technology and its ultimate uses. The answers to these questions

might help us understand the degree to which other electronic can media can pose significant challenges to the mainstream practices and products pervading television.