

The Mass Audience Lives! (Or Does It?)

Darcey West

No More Niche: Cable's Broad Move

Television studies scholars have argued that narrowcasting and the resulting audience fragmentation have changed the medium so that it no longer speaks to a mass audience but rather breaks the U.S. television audience into smaller niche groups. This may be effectual in describing the post-network era as it is currently understood; however, the television industry, specifically cable, is undergoing several major shifts that in fact move it away from narrowcasting and towards creating a broader general entertainment audience. This shift is not occurring because it is merely possible to consume more television, but because viewers actually are – by the millions – and it is in the networks' economic interest to provide content that will attract a wider segment of the television audience so their market share, and thereby advertising revenue, increase.

In today's splintered and digitized marketplace, it's necessary to target more than one narrow demographic. Contemporary cable economics demand that a network appeal to multiple niches, differentiate itself in terms of programming and marketing, establish a presence across media platforms and produce content that connects with a wide range of viewers. Viewers have hundreds of channels to choose from and increasingly watch television in nontraditional ways. With DVRs, online/mobile viewing and DVD sets of entire series, it is now more possible than ever to see every episode of a television program and every program currently airing. This temporal flexibility in viewing provides for a greater chance of audience commonality and consumption of similar television products. Audience fragmentation cannot be denied but the audience is also growing as these changes coincide with technologies allowing for greater media consumption. The new media environment is typified by a retreat from the narrowcasting that divided audiences in the multi-channel era and thus begets a reconceptualization of the mass audience.

Twenty-four cable networks now reach one hundred million subscribers, closing the gap between the broadcast networks, and with cable's dual revenue stream that means potential for more (and higher) subscriber fees and augmented ad dollars. Traditional cable networks are discovering that niche audiences are now too small a piece of the pie to be sold to advertisers and that the narrowcasting strategy is no longer economically viable. The decision to expand cable's reach to a larger proportion of viewers is a result of the desire to assert relevance, not just to audiences, but also to advertisers who must be persuaded that their money is better spent marketing to cable audiences.

A new "Big Three" is emerging in cable in the form of general entertainment networks USA, TBS and TNT. All have incredible market share dominance and profitability year after year. Recently, USA began using the term "bandwidth" in its upfront pitches to describe the wide reach its brand and programming achieve. With slogans such as "Characters Welcome," "TBS: Very Funny" and "TNT Knows Drama," the networks are able to provide a wide range of programming to viewers while still communicating what types of content can be found on the channels. Rather than reinventing the wheel, cable executives are taking what they know

about building a niche identity and expanding on the concept slightly to welcome more diverse demographics into the viewing community. The key is finding one general trait to unite an audience around such as comedy or drama – attributes that resonate with individuals of varying backgrounds and disparate lifestyles but still provide clear brand identification for both audiences and advertisers. Others, such as FX, Lifetime, The History Channel and SyFy, are trying to imitate the success of TBS, TNT and USA with rebranding initiatives that broaden content and position themselves for a wider audience.

As networks continue to experiment with such strategies and take greater risks, other questions will arise such as how much will the content itself change with this move away from narrowcasting? What are the implications for the audience and culture? These developments are still unfolding, but one thing is certain – cable networks seem to think the mass audience is indeed alive and well.