

## **The State of American Network Television**

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For the past thirty years I have observed and commented on the continual and increasing fragmentation of the American television industries. This question, focused on “network” television is in many ways anachronistic. Unless we consider all cable and satellite channels to be part of the “network,” we miss the major point of events during this period – the placement of legacy networks as true competitors in an expanding television ecosystem. True enough, the legacy nets draw major audiences even without specialty programming such as American Idol and the Super Bowl. Equally true, many cable channels are owned partially or completely by the corporate entities that control the legacies. But my interest in this question is almost always defined not by strictly institutional, economic or industrial factors. Rather, I remain interested in the cultural significance of the multi-channel environment. As I generally put this concern, what does it mean for societies and cultures to function without key, central story-telling and meaning making systems. All the terms in that question – central, story, meaning, making, systems – are critical and open for analysis.

If I were not so cautious I might tread into very large social matters. Is the increasingly uncivil tone of public discourse related to the lack of restraint imposed by a restricting story-telling system? Has the uncovering of latent (and not so latent), socio-cultural layers of racist, sexist, anger been intensified by a lack of shared cultural experiences, no matter how much that sharing was limited in previous versions?

Of course much of what concerns me might be related to many other forms of electronic exchange, rather than to television. But it is interesting to consider the relations between television as a form of cultural exchange and experience and those exchanges and experiences as offered by the internet, web defined opportunities.

On a more mundane level, I am interested in what this question means as it does turn back toward industries and institutions. How is the creative process altered when one considers the radical segmentation of “audiences,” indeed what does “audience,” always a vexed concept, mean in newer contexts? As a subset of questions, I want to know what the development of, in some cases, wonderfully rich and sophisticated commentary and discussion related to television by “non-professionals,” meaning non-academic, non-pro journalists, etc. (Which leads to another sub-question, what are all my tv critic friends going to wind up doing as they lose their jobs?)

And finally, I am interested in finding out more about how these shifts are playing out in other national, cultural and social contexts.