

The Mass Audience Lives! (Or Does It?) Melissa M. Zimdars

Revaluing Mass Audiences

Despite the emphasis on narrowcasting in the post-network era and the historical and often continued devaluation of mainstream audiences and culture, many network television texts retain a mass audience address and appeal. However, scholars often dismiss traditional network television, and the residual mainstream, mass audiences that view such television, as unworthy of continued critical analysis. This is particularly unfortunate in our seemingly fragmented media landscape because large and diverse audiences that view, negotiate, reject, or even celebrate the same television representations and programs serve as valuable gauges of widespread cultural negotiation (especially in terms of gender politics or representations of race).

For example, even though CBS is the “Most Watched Network,” exemplifying television’s continued mass address and appeal, critics and scholars often disregard the network’s programs and audiences, instead focusing on “preferred,” Quality TV texts and audiences. Ultimately, this lack of critical engagement (and sometimes blatant dismissal) devalues CBS’s diverse audience, which attracts the greatest generational range of viewers, is the number one network with both white and African American viewers, and has a cross-gendered address and appeal. It would be useful to understand why diverse groups of people all choose to watch (or understand how they negotiate) *Two and a Half Men* or *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* when there are seemingly endless options. Yet, instead of viewing mainstream CBS audiences as valuable sources of cultural information, CBS audiences continue to be simply dismissed in many scholarly writings as “indiscriminate mass audiences” or consumers of “least objectionable programming.”

Quality, niche/narrowcast, or upscale audiences are framed quite differently. Not only do the terms describing these audiences imply greater cultural worth (whether intentionally or not), but detailed descriptions and analyses of these audiences tend to as well. For example, viewers of Quality TV or pay cable programming are often framed by scholars as capable of handling mature content in more productive and thoughtful ways than broadcast or mass audiences. Popular critics further perpetuate the value hierarchy between Quality/niche audiences and mass audiences, arguing that edgy programs, such as *Oz* (HBO, 1997- 2003) or *The Shield* (FX, 2002- 2008) should never be casually “served up” to mass audiences. Ultimately, these perpetuated distinctions between types of audiences (audiences that may, in fact, overlap) only obscure the potentially heightened cultural value of analyzing residual mass audiences in a fragmented media environment.

Fortunately, and despite the conventional emphasis on Quality, niche audiences, CBS’s mass audience appeal is proving to be advantageous during difficult economic times. While network television is often regarded as outmoded or backwards in its broad address, CBS continues to champion the worth of network television that seems to cast more broadly than anyone else. For example, cable channel FX, which works at framing itself as edgier and more adult than other cable channels and broadcast networks, bought syndication rights to *Two and a Half Men* in order to broaden the network’s appeal. FX, the boundary-pushing cable channel now finds value in appealing to a wider audience during an era of increased competition for advertising dollars. This is particularly

important because it revalues the mass audience that has consistently been deemed unworthy and undesirable by advertisers (and networks, critics, and scholars) because of mass audiences associations with an undifferentiated affinity toward devalued, lowbrow programming. Consequently, the historically deprecated, “indiscriminate,” and thought to be out-dated mass audience can in many ways also be seen as an ideal audience (reliable and consistent) from an industry standpoint, and from a culturally revealing, critically useful standpoint as well.

Now that advertisers and networks seem to be revaluing and acknowledging the continued presence and importance of mass audiences, hopefully critics and scholars will as well. Instead of discussing Quality audiences at the expense of mass audiences (or by perpetuating a hierarchical binary between them), different types of audiences should be valued for their unique roles (and different types of engagement or participation) in furthering our understanding of the relationship between television and society.