

## **The Mass Audience Lives! (Or Does It?)**

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### In Defense of Mainstream

We might understand “mass audience” in several senses:

(1) A huge audience, e.g., 153 million American viewers of the last Super Bowl. Here practically a whole society is paying attention to one thing at one time. This is a remarkable achievement for media in any era but especially ours, when we are supposedly fragmenting into practically infinite niche markets. The persistence of such events suggests that even though "mass media" might be outmoded, media's mass appeal has not diminished as much as we might think and in some ways may even be intensifying.

(2) An audience who responds as one to the texts for which they assemble. In this sense the audience is mass rather than being made up of multiple individuals, or distinct subgroups. This is what the mid-century mass society critique assumes of commercial mass culture: by uniting society in the experience of one culture it homogenizes and makes its audience into passive victims of bland, repetitive entertainment. This notion of mass audience assumes that media is a social problem.

(3) A “mainstream” audience defined in relation to the audiences for narrowcast media. Both elite and subcultural forms define themselves in relation to this imagined mainstream, which they construct as commercial and inauthentic. Mainstream includes chart-topping pop music and blockbuster network television series like *American Idol*. It is often denigrated in terms that introduce ideological constructions of taste in which white, male, adult, and higher-class forms are privileged over non-white, female, juvenile, and working-class forms. But contrary to the assumptions of the mass society critique, mainstream culture is not addressed to a homogenized audience. This audience is diverse, made up of multiple audiences of various demographic groups, all of whom might have distinct modes of engagement. This diversity is what makes it so widely appealing and commercially lucrative. Consider how the Wii gaming console is seen as a “mainstreaming” of gaming: it takes play out of the young, male, geek niche and addresses not only this audience but also younger and older audiences of both genders. Like any cultural category, mainstream may be impossible to define precisely and its meaning shifts according to usage. But mainstream is a concept we generally recognize and identify, and it may be useful to think about its importance for our understanding of contemporary media.

Without adopting the pejorative values sometimes applied to it, media scholars might want to adopt an appreciation of mainstream culture for various purposes, not least of which is the defense and celebration of the popular -- the culture of ordinary people rather than of more

narrowly constituted fan subcultures and upscale elites, which self-define in opposition to the mainstream. But we will want to avoid defining mainstream as necessarily the kind of mass audience indicated in definitions (1) and (2). Mainstream culture and mainstream audiences are not necessarily huge according to the terms of the media industries' logic, and they cannot be assumed to be homogenized and passive. A television show with an audience of 2 million, such as *As The World Turns*, might be deemed insufficiently popular according to the television industry. But this is still undoubtedly a mass audience, and we should not value it by the same economic criteria applied in corporate decision-making. Appreciating mass audiences offers an opportunity to resist adopting the media industries' terms as our own. *ATWT* had roughly the same number of viewers during the first week of August 2010 as *Mad Men*. This surely indicates that the size of the audience has little to do with a television's show valuation in all of the usual senses. So *mainstream* must be understood independently of audience size and commercial profitability, though these are undoubtedly factors in its construction.

We might also want to reclaim the mass as an effort to reassess our terms for understanding popular culture reception. Fan studies, for all their merits, are defining audience activity upwards to the level of "participation." If being a fan means participating by producing media, the mass audience is rarely made up of fans, and thinking of audiences in terms of fandoms slights the lion's share of the audience for popular media. The mass audience understood as a mainstream is not a fannish audience, because fans generally converge as subcultures on cult texts. Even as the mainstream is being remade in the image of cult media by producers eager to exploit passionate fannish modes of engagement, the vast majority of media experiences are hardly cultish or fannish. Mainstream media is undoubtedly often an object of passionate feelings but not of the sort that move most of its consumers to participation. Appreciating the terms of the mainstream's engagement with media might be a challenge, but we need to know how media functions in its myriad social contexts.