Television as New Media: Post-Network Reception Practices and the Splintering of the Mass Audience

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for Lucy and my parents

ABSTRACT

The proliferation of original programming on cable networks and the emergence of digital technologies has led many observers to claim that contemporary American television is in the midst of its third "golden age" (the first two are associated with the 1950s and 1980s, respectively). Yet, simultaneously, the medium increasingly comes to resemble other forms of new media as audiences become more fragmented and more variable. This dissertation employs critical audience analysis to address the ways in which orientations to post-network era television vary within the formerly mass audience of the American middle-class.

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CHAPTER I

CULTURAL STATUS AND AMERICAN TELEVISION

In the estimation of many observers, the cultural significance of television has surpassed that of mainstream film (Cieply 2012; O'Hehir 2012; Polone 2012; Wolcott 2012; M. Harris 2011). According to the dominant narrative, starting in the late 1990s, a wave of hour-long dramas began discarding the rules of traditional TV by introducing complicated characters and raising the quality (in terms of production, writing, and visuals) of the medium (Martin 2013; Sepinwall 2012). Since the premiere of *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), the number of scripted series produced for cable channels has increased by 1000% (Littleton 2014). In addition, 145 scripted original prime-time series and miniseries have been aired by broadcast and cable networks in 2014, a 14% increase over the same time period in the previous year. Furthermore, without considering digital outlets, at least 350 new and returning series have been ordered for 2015's television production cycle. Although exact figures are unavailable, original content orders by digital outlets including Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu could raise the number of television series in production substantially. Netflix's Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos has stated the streaming service hopes to expand its original content production to approximately twenty new seasons a year (Luckerson 2014). With this explosion of content, contemporary

audiences are now experiencing the bounty of a "third golden age."

Throughout most of its history, however, television has been a low-status cultural form. This low-status is apparent in the devaluation of television technology, television content, and television audiences. During the network era (from the early 1950s to the early 1980s), television was a domestic medium (watched at home) with limited content produced by three over-the-air broadcast networks.[1] In addition, this limited content was only available at specific times as determined by the schedules of broadcast networks.[2] In comparison to film, television had long been conceived as technologically deficient (Dawson 2007). The limitations of the cathode ray tube resulted in poor picture quality. The limitations of over-the-air broadcast technology

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1 The connotation of the term "network" in academic discussions of television vary with context. The phrase "network television" typically refers to the "big three" commercial broadcast (over-the-air) television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) that dominated American television between the early 1950s and the late 1980s. In recent years, "network television" has come to include FOX. The central distinction in relation to this usage is the distinction between network television (free, over-the-air) and cable television (fee-based, delivered by fiber-optic cables). In contrast, a single "television network" is a label that can be applied to any channel. NBC is a "television network" as is CNN.

2 According to Raymond Williams, "flow" is the defining characteristic of television as both a technology and a cultural form. He argues, "In all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organization, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow. This phenomenon, of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form" (1974, 79). In some cases, he argues, the flow of television programming can be more significant that any individual program, "It is evident that what is now called 'an evening's viewing' is in some ways planned, by providers and then by viewers, as a whole; that it is in any event planned in discernible sequences which in this sense override particular programme units" (Williams 1974, 85–86). The conceptual usefulness of "flow" in the post-network era remains a subject of debate. Discussing the emergence of digital video recording technologies, for example, Mittell (2011) asserts, "If the *flow* [italics in original] metaphor defined television (and television studies) in previous decades, my children experience the medium within the framework of *files* [italics in original], digital objects to be accessed in menus and manipulated via an interface" (50). In contrast, Uricchio (2004) argues that interruptions in flow have been taking place since the remote control became popular in the 1950s and with each successive change in technology from remote control, to VCR, to DVR, the television industry worried that a perceived increase in viewer agency threatened existing advertising based revenue models. The questionable conceptual usefulness of "flow" is particularly significant in the context of the post-network era as, like the anti-TV discourses dependent upon drug metaphors, the absence of control is intimately tied to the medium's devaluation.

resulted in inconsistent signal reception.

Regarding content, television programming has been consistently marginalized as commercial and anesthetizing. Responding to the realities of the market, network era producers created content that conformed to the least objectionable programming theory of audience behavior. This approach was largely based on the belief that the absence of objectionable material was more important to the success of a given program than the presence of any other textual features.[3] As a consequence of production guided by this logic, scripted television became an extremely bland medium, emphatically devoid of social, intellectual, or artistic issues.[4] In the limited number of contexts when serious social issues were addressed, their resolution at the conclusion of the hour encouraged the ideological belief that large-scale social problems can be meaningfully addressed at the individual, rather than the systemic level (Gitlin 1987).

As a corollary to the devaluation of television technology and television content, television audiences have been maligned as passive, lazy, vulgar, or stupid. As one scholar observes, “Behind many critiques of the medium as exploitative, sensational, trivial, and inane lies an unacknowledged disdain for an audience that is deemed infantile and feminine” (Joyrich

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3 This approach is closely associated with Paul Klein who was NBC's head of programming during the 1960's. In the context of a three network system, Klein explains, “When you put on a show, then, you immediately start with your fair share. You get your 32-share ... that's about [a third] of the network audience, and the other networks get their 32 shares. We all start equally. Then we can add to that by our competitors' failure-they become objectionable so people turn to us if we're less objectionable” (S. Johnson 2006, 171). Objectionable content includes material that requires “thought” or “education.” Content that qualifies as least objectionable includes melodrama, “a little tear here and there,” and morality tales.

4 Even when producers to began moving away from the least objectionable content model and “quality” shows like *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) led some television scholars to declare the emergence of a “second golden age,” members of the cultural elite continued to blame television for a variety of social ills including the absence of meaningful public discourse (Postman 1985) and declining levels of civic engagement (Putnam 2000).

1996, 22). Historically, such disdain has been expressed in several ways. Among the anti-tv activist groups of the 1990s, for example, television viewing was considered a public health concern akin to drug addiction (Mittell 2000).[5] More commonly, members of the college educated middle-classes, the “chattering class of *New York Times* readers,” distanced themselves from television audiences by proclaiming that they did not own a television (Lotz 2014, 64). Nonetheless, there is reason to believe any number of such claims were false. By 1965, 94% of American households owned a television (Bump 2011). By 1980, TV ownership had increased to 98% and remained steady for the next twenty years.

Given the low-status of television technology, content, and audiences, the medium's rising status only becomes possible in the wake of several industrial and technological shifts. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of cable networks increased the amount of

5 Assumptions regarding the passive consumer of popular culture are common in much of the research associated with the media effects tradition. Along with Katz, Lazarsfeld elaborated the minimal effects model in *Personal Influence* (1955). This work was a more general study of the influence of the media on a variety of areas of peoples’ everyday lives. It became famous for elaborating the “two-step” flow model of the influence of the media on the audience. Instead of directly and powerfully influencing people, Katz and the study confirmed the idea that media effects, rather than being powerful and evil, were actually for the most part rather minor and non-invasive, mediated through the more important effect of opinion leaders. The limited effects model was influential in audience research throughout the 1960's. However, by the 1970's, this model was frequently criticized. For example, Gitlin (1978) set forth a direct, vitriolic critique of limited effects theory generally which has been widely read and cited, and which had an important influence on audience research since. In this article, he accuses Lazarsfeld, Katz, Klapper, and other limited effects theorists of misconceiving the problem of media effects. By conceptualizing an “effect” too narrowly and concretely, Gitlin claimed that researchers missed the many less-measurable ways the mass media influence its audience. Much of Gitlin’s critique of the limited effects model has been picked up today by researchers studying the audience from a culturally contextualized perspective, influenced by anthropological and sociological methods. Nonetheless, the two-step flow model remains relevant in a variety of fields including advertising (Carr and Hayes 2014), journalism (Farnsworth, Soroka, and Young 2010), and information sciences (Case et al. 2004). As Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) observe in their meta-analysis, in recent years, scholars addressing new media are drawing attention to the ways in which the dramatically expanded set of choices facing media audiences necessitate a reconsideration of the central theoretical premises of the media effects paradigm.

available content. This period is frequently described as the “multi-channel” transition. There was a dramatic increase in the amount of content producers needed for an ever-expanding number of advertiser-supported cable channels. In addition, in 1986, the launch of FOX put additional pressure on the “big three” – CBS, NBC, and ABC. At the same time, devices like the VCR gave audiences a measure of control over scheduling. Nonetheless, network era norms remained dominant. Cable channels like CNN and ESPN lacked broad appeal, did not produce original scripted programming, and were unable to complete with the networks. Despite providing viewers with slightly more control that they previously had, VCRs were not particularly reliable recording devices.

In the late-1990s, American television entered the “post-network” era. Although the phrase has been used in reference to the changing economic reality of the Canadian television industry in the early 1990s (P. W. Taylor 1993) and to describe “the significant audience penetration of cable TV and VCRs” in mid-1990s America (Marc 1996, xxvii), for contemporary television scholars (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009), it refers to the period of television history that began in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Specifically, it refers to fundamental changes in the television viewing experience and television content. The increasingly widespread adoption of “time-shifting” technologies like the digital video recorder (DVR) transformed the experience of watching television. Viewers who once engaged with a continuous flow of program content determined by the networks over which they had no control became able to engage with individual programs that could be recorded, saved, and re-viewed at will. In addition, the popularity of television shows on DVD gave TV a collectible quality that was previously

associated with music and film. At the same time, the number of available alternatives to traditional network content exploded as cable channels began producing scripted television series. It is difficult to overstate the impact of these changes. According to Katz (2009), "The television of 'sharedness' – of nation-building and family togetherness – is no longer with us, having made room for a television of hundreds of channels, of "niche" broadcasting, of portability, one that is part of a system that integrates with the Internet and the other new media" (7). In this context, cable dramas like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad* are often credited with improving the overall quality of television content.[6]

Yet, existing knowledge about television's elevated cultural status emerges from examinations of discourses associated with cultural elites including industry professionals and critics.[7] Writing from a cultural studies perspective, Newman and Levine (2012) argue that

6 Although *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad* are produced by cable networks, they are not produced in identical economic contexts. *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad* are produced by the advertiser-supported cable network AMC. As an advertiser-supported cable network, AMC has two primary revenue streams. The first is advertising. AMC sells time in its programming schedule to advertisers which they fill with commercials. The second is carriage fees. Cable providers, like Comcast and Time Warner, sell customers monthly access to a particular set of channels (the cable bundle). To include a channel like AMC in its bundle, cable providers pay AMC "carriage fees" for the right to carry their programming. Channels distributed through such arrangements are collectively called "basic cable." In addition to AMC, bundles are typically composed of basic cable channels including: ESPN, CNN, TNT, USA, A&E, and TBS. In contrast, *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* are produced by the subscriber-supported cable network HBO. Although HBO does generate revenue through carriage fees, the network does not generate revenue through advertising. Instead, customers who pay cable providers for access to a cable bundle can choose to pay an additional monthly fee ($10-20) for HBO. The majority of HBO's revenue comes from these subscribers. Channels distributed through such arrangements are collectively called "premium cable." In addition to HBO, premium cable channels include: Showtime, Cinemax, and Starz.

7 There is some literature that addresses the elevated status of HBO rather than television more broadly. The subscriber-supported cable network, which began broadcasting in 1972 as a subsidiary of New York City's Sterling Manhattan Cable which was itself partially owned by Time, Inc. (Mullen 2008, 108), initially distinguished itself from other cable networks with uncensored movies and sports programming. By the late 1990's, however, the network had become "the TV equivalent of a designer label" (Edgerton 2008, 9). Both the expectations of viewers and the network's brand image are frequently associated with the 1996 introduction of the marketing slogan "It's Not TV." As a host of

television's “cultural legitimation” relies on discourses that work to distance contemporary texts, audiences, and viewing practices from the medium's low-status past. Using a variety of materials from the popular and trade press, they demonstrate that “cultural elites (including journalists, popular critics, TV creators and executives, and media scholars)” elevate television by investing “the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms” (7). Yet, in this process of selection and exclusion, television only “becomes respectable through the elevation of one concept of the medium at the expense of another” (13).

Scholars to date have not addressed American audience reception practices in relation to TV's elevated cultural status.[8] In fact, there has been very little audience scholarship since the late 1990s. As a consequence of the same industrial and technological shifts that resulted in television's rising status, critical audience analysis relying on qualitative methodologies including ethnographic observation and interviews has become increasingly difficult for multiple reasons. First, the expansion of cable programming choices limits the degree to which researches can rely on audiences to be watching the same shows. Between 2002 and 2012, prime-time[9] ratings for broadcast networks fell 50% (Stelter 2013a). Television ratings are created by the

scholars have noted, HBO's marketing strategy relies upon the long-standing marginalization of television and its audiences (Feuer 2007; McCabe and Akass 2007; Leverette, Ott, and Buckley 2008; Edgerton and Jones 2009). In reference to television's frequently maligned audience, for example, McCabe and Akass (2008) note that HBO draws “much capital from cultural snobbery around television as it sets out to appeal to the college-educated audience who supposedly do not watch TV” (85).

8 There is some research addressing the relationship between the status of television content and European audiences (Lizardo and Skiles 2009). With television industries rooted in publicly funded content, however, there is little reason to believe the reception practices of European television audiences will resemble contemporary American audiences.

9 “Prime-time” refers to peak television watching hours, which are between 8pm and 11pm. Television networks charge advertisers premium rates as commercials are more likely to be seen by the largest numbers of viewers.

Nielsen Company. Nielsen ratings, which cannot be considered research in an academic sense (Meehan 1990), are based on a variety of data collection methods including time diaries and monitoring devices known as "people meters." The company samples approximately 20,000 households which include approximately 50,000 individuals. Rather than reflecting an actual number of viewers at a given time, ratings are a currency for the economic transactions between advertisers and networks. Second, the expansion of broadband internet service and the increasing capabilities offered through mobile devices allow viewers to engage with this ever-expanding amount of content in physical spaces that are not the home. As television continues "diversifying in form and contents," audiences become "less predictable, more fragmented and more variable" (Livingstone 1999, 63).

Among many television scholars, audience research is thought to be too difficult as viewer choice and control has increased to such a degree that reception can only be conceptualized as having no single behavior or mode of viewing.[10] As one prominent television

10 Some related concerns had been addressed before the post-network era. Specifically, the intellectual turn towards "third generation" research with its focus on "post-modern" audiences began in cultural studies during the late 1980s and, according to Alasuutari (1999), emphasizes that " … there isn't really such a thing as the 'audience' out there; one must bear in mind that the audience is, most of all, a discursive construct produced by a particular analytic gaze" (6). The definitive statement regarding television audiences during the multi-channel transition did not emerge until the mid 1990s when Ien Ang began promoting a critical ethnographic methodology in response to the theoretical needs created by the changing nature of media audiences. Echoing the conception of postmodernity recognizing "reality" to be an "unstable proposition" (Lemert 1997, 11), Ang notes that the state of knowledge regarding television audiences is always in flux. She writes, "What matters is not the certainty of knowledge about audiences, but an ongoing critical and intellectual engagement with the multifarious ways in which we constitute ourselves through media consumption" (Ang 1995, 52). Furthermore, she adds, "Acknowledging the inevitably partial (in the sense of unfinished and incomplete) nature of our theorizing and research would arguably be a more enabling position from which to come to grips with the dynamic complexity and complex dynamics of media consumption practices" (Ang 1995, 67). In this theoretical context, three basic strains of reception research can be considered third generation (Grindstaff and Turow 2006). The first type of reception study attempts to understand the "decoding" processes associated with television programming (Jhally and Lewis 1992). The second type of reception work is primary focused on the behavior and interpretations of television fans (Jenkins 1992;

scholar observes, “I feel that I understand the politics of the 80s living/sitting room better than I understand the location of television viewing today” (Gray 2014). Some scholars have gone so far as to declare that the concept of the audience is no longer useful. According to Jermyn and Holmes (2006) the notion of the audience is obsolete, or at least disappearing. According to Gillmor (2006), enabled by networked technology, “the former audience” is making the crucial shift from consumer to citizen. Indeed, the difficulty of conducting empirical research on contemporary audiences has led many to seek alternative avenues for reception analysis. One such alternative is “audience history” (Bourdon 2014; Mihelj 2014; Penati 2013). Another alternative is examining the construction of fan identities and the creation of content based on television texts within fan communities.

“Fan studies” scholarship is largely indebted to Jenkins' (1992) work on “textual poachers.” Building on Michel de Certeau's notion of “poaching,” Jenkins argues, “Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media” (1992, 23). Following Jenkins, fan studies work often suggests the driving force of fandom is the the social pleasure of being part of an accepting community that shares one’s passion and interests (Brooker 2002; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005). According to Hills and Luther, for example, discussions of *CSI* frequently require audience members to identify their favorite series in the franchise, their favorite episode of all time, or their favorite episode in a given season (2007, 219). Even among “anti-fans” who find television texts morally or ethically problematic (sometimes without having

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Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). The last type of reception research examines the consumption of media in the context of a larger social milieu (Press and Cole 1999).

watched them), “the interest, or even sense of responsibility, in sharing one's reading” is central (Gray 2005a, 848). Research on fans and fandom, however, does not address the status of television texts in a context beyond that of fans' affection or lack thereof. Furthermore, given that fan behavior reflects a level of emotional investment and knowledge acquisition/performance that is not typical of general audiences (Couldry 2011),[11] such research cannot speak to the broader issues of class, status, and power that have historically animated much audience reception scholarship (Morley 1980; Press 1991). To fill this gap in the literature, this dissertation employs critical audience analysis to address the ways in which middle-class viewers understand television's elevated status.

Chapter Descriptions:

In chapter two, I use qualitative interviews with nineteen middle-class young-adults to examine the ways in which audience reception of post-network television vary within middle-class audiences. The analytic focus is on orientations to television as a medium rather than addressing individual respondents' understandings of specific content. The sample is divided by educational attainment and occupational status. Individuals with post-graduate education or high-status occupations are considered “privileged.” Individuals without post-graduate education or high-status occupations are considered “non-privileged.” The sample includes ten privileged

11 Couldry (2011) argues that it is inappropriate to generalize about audiences from specific fan practices for four additional reasons (492-3). Demographically, the most intense fans are white, male, middle-class, and college-educated. Fandom requires higher levels of disposable time than is available to the population at large. Knowledge about fandom typically emerges from the exclusive study of young fans. Lastly, arguments about the significance of fans and fandom assume that such practices will become more common over time.

respondents and nine non-privileged respondents. I find that privileged middle-class young-adults have unambiguously positive relationships to post-network TV. They intellectualize television and make qualitative distinctions between different types of content. In addition, they use particular knowledge as cultural capital while emphasizing the distinctiveness of their consumption practices. In contrast, young-adults without post-graduate education or high-status occupations have much more ambiguous relationships with television. Some consider watching television to be a guilty pleasure. These findings illustrate the uneven significance of cultural legitimation in the post-network era. As such, the data in this chapter points to the significance of audience fragmentation in the post-network era while also drawing attention to the limits of such fragmentation. The availability of content is so vast, however, that it is difficult to see how audiences navigate TV's hierarchies when viewers are discussing a variety of shows, in a variety of genres, that are produced in a variety of economic contexts.

In chapter three, I outline the contours of the status hierarchy associated with hour-long prime-time cable crime dramas. In the broader context of the post-network era landscape, scripted original series produced by cable networks are more closely associated with the medium's elevated cultural status than any other type of programming (Newman and Levine 2012, 80). In the narrow context of scripted original series produced by cable networks, the genre of crime drama is more closely associated with the emergence of a “third golden age” than other types of television such as legal drama or medical drama. Using a variety of materials including critical evaluations (as represented by Metascores[12]) and industry awards (as represented by the

12 Discussed at length in chapter three, a “metascore” is a weighted average of reviews from top critics and publications that ranges from zero to one hundred. Metascores are the proprietary products of the website Metacritic.com which collects and aggregates reviews of television shows, movies, and video

Prime-Time Emmy awards and the Creative Arts Emmy awards), I argue that the status hierarchy of prime-time cable crime drama includes three categories: culturally legitimated shows, high-status shows, and low-status shows. On the basis of this hierarchy, I argue that addressing middle-class audience reception practices related to ten shows would be useful for multiple reasons.[13] First, focusing on cable crime drama creates an opportunity to explore the ways in which middle-class audiences navigate post-network television's status hierarchies at the level of the text, rather than at the level of genre. Second, this hierarchy complicates Newman and Levine's (2012) notion of cultural status in the post-network era by acknowledging that legitimacy is not a total state for television shows. Just as some genres are associated with higher levels of status than others, so to do some texts have more prestige than others within the context of a specific genre. Third, research regarding middle-class audiences and cable crime drama can speak to the ways in which reception varies with both the social status of viewers and with the cultural status of texts.

In chapter four, I use qualitative interviews with thirty-one young-adults to examine the ways in which audience reception of prime-time cable crime drama vary within middle-class audiences. As in chapter two, individuals with post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered “privileged” middle-class young-adults. The sample includes thirteen privileged respondents and eighteen non-privileged respondents. Among privileged middle-class young-adults, the reception practices associated with cable crime drama include three common

games.

13 The premium cable shows are *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014), *Dexter* (SHO, 2006–2013), and *Homeland* (SHO, 2011-present). The basic cable shows are *Burn Notice* (USA, 2009-present), *The Closer* (TNT, 2005-2012), *Sons of Anarchy* (FX, 2008-2014), *Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010-), and *White Collar* (USA, 2007-2013).

features: assertions that the difference between network and cable shows has status implications, positive attitudes regarding textual features that deviate from network era norms, and attempts to distance themselves from network content and audiences. Despite the similarity of such practices, there is variation among privileged middle-class young-adults. Specifically, reception practices associated with cable crime drama vary with privileged audience members' familiarity with shows located on multiple parts of the genre's status hierarchy as defined in chapter three. Among middle-class young-adults without post-graduate education or a high-status occupation, attitudes towards particular cable crime drama are expressed with regards to terms textual features like narrative structure and the likability of characters. By narrowing the scope of the analysis to cable crime drama, these findings illustrate the ways in which middle-class audiences navigate post-network status hierarchies and reveal that "good" TV taste requires a breadth of cultural knowledge.

In chapter five, this dissertation concludes with a summary of the research findings, a consideration of television's status hierarchies as they stand in mid-2015, and a discussion regarding the future of critical audience research. In light of the distinctive elements of middle-class reception in the post-network era as identified in chapters two and four, the current post-network television landscape presents serious challenges to audience researchers. Yet, the belief that simply being able to more effectively observe viewer behaviors like programming choices, locations of television viewing, or platform preferences as they might vary with types of content or social context requires that audience scholars ignore the fundamental instability of television audiences. Ultimately, I argue that the future of audience research depends upon qualitative

scholars' willingness to expand the kinds of material that constitute data by taking advantage of all available opportunities and incorporating more integrated conceptions of media engagement rather than solely relying upon specific media systems and cultural forms.

CHAPTER II

MIDDLE-CLASS YOUNG-ADULTS AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION IN THE POST-NETWORK ERA

Introduction:

Throughout the network era and the multi-channel transition, many members of the college educated American middle-class television audiences distanced themselves from television due to its association with commercialism and low-status (feminine and working-class) viewers. As one television scholar observes, "Just ask someone how much time a day they spend watching television entertainment. In all likelihood, they will either brag of their abstinence, rather shamefully admit the figure, or lie to you with a gross underestimation to save face" (Gray 2008, 6). Yet, in the late 1990s, a series of industrial changes coupled with technological shifts results in the collapse of the norms that defined television culturally in the network era. The once mass audience of the network era is now fragmented (Webster 2005).

If the multi-channel transition can be distinguished from the network era by changing economies of production that resulted in the need for more diverse content and the fracturing of the mass audience, then contemporary television is distinguished largely by the extreme degree to which digital technology exacerbated these trends. Viewers are watching a wider range of content on a wide range of devices. In addition, due to economic changes allowing producers

like advertiser supported cable networks to create content that will only be watched by one percent of the available audience (Lotz 2007, 37), television's cultural status begins to rise leading some to declare the arrival of a "third golden age" (Martin 2013).

In this chapter, I use data gathered through qualitative interviews with nineteen middle-class young-adults (ages 18-34) to argue that the significance of television's elevated cultural status in the post-network era varies with, but is not determined by, social location. This differs from audience research addressing middle-class audiences during the multi-channel transition. It must noted, however, that operationalizing social class for qualitative social scientific research is notoriously difficult. Although the middle-class/working-class divides that informed past efforts were not as neatly separated as they often appeared, recent changes in class structures and broader shifts in the nature of work have further complicated this issue. As such, it is necessary to keep in mind that social class, as categories and as lived experiences, are complex, fluid, and malleable.

Using the theoretical perspective of critical audience analysis, I find that television's increasing cultural status allows middle-class young-adults with post-graduate education or high-status occupations to embrace the medium. In contrast, middle-class young adults without post-graduate education or high-status occupations have tenuous relationships with television that, in many ways, seem to be holdovers from the network era. These differing attitudes towards post-network television are meaningful precisely because they are identified within the American middle-class. In addition, middle-class audience reception highlights the uneven significance of cultural legitimation. For those with sufficient cultural and economic resources, television's

“third golden age” provides the sort of respected and respectable content that audiences (like themselves) have always deserved. For those who cannot afford such a luxury, by and large, television remains low-status culture tainted with residue of the network era and burdened by its association with passive, feminized, and working-class audiences. After presenting these findings, this chapter concludes with a brief consideration of the limitations of this portion of the dissertation.

Literature Review:

Examinations of social class during the network era were largely unconcerned with internal status hierarchies of American television (Press 1991; Lembo 2000). One notable exception was Brower's (1992) analysis of the advocacy group Viewers for Quality Television (VQT). Following the cancellation rumors surrounding *Cagney and Lacey* in 1985, Dorothy Swanson partnered with Donna Deen, who two years earlier had successfully spearheaded a letter writing campaign to save *St. Elsewhere* from cancellation, to found the organization which used a newsletter to alert viewers to possible cancellations. Yet, in contrast with most TV-related special interest groups like TV-Free-America who attempted to influence industry practices, “the concern of VQT is less with specific content or subject matter … but rather with linking a taken-for-granted set of ‘enlightened’ middle-class, liberal, feminist values with a repeatedly examined set of aesthetic concerns – writing, acting, ‘realism,’ and authorship” (Brower 1992, 172). Demographically, VQT's membership was more upscale than most television audiences and were thus of particular interest for advertisers (Brower 1992, 175). Nonetheless, the commitment to

enlightened values existed in tension with subjective criteria that serve as the basis for fan identification. In the context of the network era, fan engagement with television only becomes acceptable for this audience when it is understood in intellectual terms. As such, “Fandom, for them, *is* [italics in original] tastemaking” (Brower 1992, 181). Brower concludes by noting, “the very contradiction between fan and tastemaker articulates the position of many upper-middle-class fans of TV. Still espousing the mass-culture ideology, these viewers have both appropriated and contributed to the ‘quality’ discourse in order to permit themselves the pleasure of fandom” (1992, 182). Although this analysis makes several important, indeed prescient, observations, the use of fandom and tastemaking as overlapping theoretical frameworks inappropriately conflate issues of engagement with those of aesthetics.

As television producers began moving away from the least objectionable content model in the 1980s, the belief that some shows were now qualitatively superior to others led some scholars to declare the emergence of television's second golden age. Thompson (1997) defines “quality television”[14] in relation to “'regular' TV” (13) and claims it to be “better, more sophisticated, and more artistic than the usual network fare” (12); “quality” texts are “literary and writer-based” as indicated by the use of “self-conscious” content and more “complex” writing (15-16). In Thompson's analysis, quality shows include: *Hill Street Blues*, *Thirtysomething*, *St. Elsewhere*, *China Beach*, *Cagney & Lacey*, *Twin Peaks*, *Moonlighting*, *Northern Exposure*, *L.A. Law*, and *Picket Fences*. Yet, scholarship addressing middle-class audience reception of quality shows is limited by the medium's low-status.

14 As Brunsdon (1990) argues, the distinction between regular and “quality” television is inherently subjective and always involves the exercise of social power.

Shows like *The X-Files* (1993-2002), which according to Johnson (2005) began the "quality/cult" phenomenon, reflect "a form of 'anti-mainstream' distinction where cult status is about finding quality in unexpected places and revaluing otherwise devalued/popular texts" (Hills 2004, 516). As Ross (2008) observes in her analysis of the relationship between television fans and the internet, however, "the cult social audience emerges out of defensiveness, creating a situation in which the viewer cannot escape the critical (and industrial and cultural) confines against which they struggle without this social audience dissolving" (52). The consequences of the interplay between cult television fans and critical taste hierarchies that frequently devalue cult texts can be seen in Bird's (2003) examination of *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman*'s online fandom. In particular, these fans were defensive about their series' quality because of mainstream perception of the show as pulpy while taking on the mode of proving how the series met standard definitions of quality that critics were overlooking. This reflects the Catch-22 that, according to Brundson (1997), results from the reality that spectators always interact with others' perceptions of them and their text and this relationship informs the way spectators watch demonstrating the inability to escape the "landscapes of taste" as frameworks for understanding television (148).[15]

Among the empirical examinations of television audiences during the multi-channel transition, those that speak most directly to the middle-class audience's relationship with quality television address viewers of *The Simpsons*. When it first premiered in 1989, *The Simpsons* could be distinguished from television more generally on several fronts. First, *The Simpsons* was the

15 Ross makes an interesting observation on this topic noting, "While cult scholars often emphasize landscapes of taste when they describe cult fans as reacting against the industry and mainstream critics and viewers, this can elide the fact that fans also react against their own potential cult status" (2008, 52).

first animated show (cartoon) to appear during prime-time since *The Flintstones* ended in 1966. As an adult cartoon during the multi-channel transition, it had no peers. Second, *The Simpsons* was a pop culture phenomenon that went beyond the confines of American television. In September 1991, for example, the episode "Stark Raving Dad" (S03E01) includes Michael Jackson, the biggest pop star on the planet, as a guest star. Less than two months later, the world premiere of Jackson's eleven minute music video for the song "Black or White" was broadcast by FOX following an episode of *The Simpsons* (McKerrow 1991). Third, as a text, *The Simpsons* included material that appealed to a variety of demographic groups, most notably adults and children. However, in appealing to both adults and children, the show did not sacrifice its appeal to one audience at the expense of another. As a result, highbrow cultural references (Arnold 2004) exist alongside television's more traditional lowbrow fare such as the stereotypical sitcom father as a working-class buffoon (Bettie 1995).

Gray (2005) uses qualitative data gathered from interviews with thirty-five highly educated middle-class viewers to argue that these individuals form an interpretive community with common understandings of *The Simpsons*. Although these respondents had not "wholly rejected high-brow mythology of bad televisual fiction and good non-fiction," they nonetheless understood *The Simpsons* as "smart television, and so exempted the show from the criticism many of them held for the other 'crap' on television" (Gray 2005b, 131). Like viewer relationships with "quality" shows, *The Simpsons*' middle-class audience appreciates the show in the broader context of television's devaluation. Yet, however special *The Simpsons* may or may not be, that specialness is understood as an exception to the broader rule classifying television as

“crap.”

In contrast with Gray's (2005) research which largely treats the middle-class as a monolith, Alter's (2003) research on audience reception of *The Simpsons* in the context of family life speaks to issues of class and status. Based on multiple interviews with two families who possess “low economic capital” but whose “cultural capital (education and related tastes) marked them as middle class,” Alters finds that, in regards to *The Simpsons*, “the process of distinction seemed strongly connected to their tenuous class position” (2003, 166). For Sharon Hartman, a forty-two year-old married mother of three who works part-time as a clerk, the show was one of the worst things her children watched largely as a result of “its general 'crudeness'” (Alters 2003, 169). Not surprisingly, Sharon tried to regulate her children's access to the show thereby distancing “herself and her family from what she saw as a low-culture product” (171). The Garcias' relationship with *The Simpsons* was significantly more ambivalent. Bob and Susan, who largely opted out of middle class professional life despite both having college degrees and owning their home, viewed television as an extension of books and stories. According to Alter, “They used a naturalized, contemporary definition of books: that books represent “real” learning, a mark of the educated (and middle class) person, as does criticism, as in the children’s recounting of plots and ideas [from *The Simpsons*]” (2003, 179). Despite exhibiting differ orientations to the show, Alters notes that the “stakes involved in policing the boundaries of taste in these families were particularly high” (2003, 166). As the Hartmans and the Garcias “needed to maintain or increase their cultural capital to guard against the effects of any loss of economic capital – a loss that could plunge them definitively into the lower class, with material and

symbolic consequences," both families "struggled to secure more highly regarded middle-class positions by laying claim to more cultural capital" (Alters 2003, 166).

It is this tenuous relationship between class, cultural capital, and television that defines the central contribution of audience research during the multichannel transition. In *Television and New Media Audiences*, Seiter (1999) relies upon Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to ground a "feminist ethnographic" methodology resulting in several qualitative case studies. She finds middle-class audience members largely conceptualize television as "lowliest of media" and tend to "compare their own television viewing to that of the imagined mass audience, one that is more interested, more duped, more entertained, more gullible than themselves" (Seiter 1999, 131). In particular, members of the middle class without high levels of educational attainment express defensiveness when admitting to watching television because of its historical association with feminine passivity, laziness, and the masses. For those with lower levels of socioeconomic status and higher levels of educational attainment, the anxieties about media effects are most pronounced as such audiences "cannot afford the luxury of indulging a love of popular culture, for fear that they will appear uneducated" (Seiter 1999, 131).

In one case study, Seiter examines differing orientations to television among preschool teachers. For Sara, a Montessori school teacher, "books are basically good and television is basically bad; film falls somewhere in between" (Seiter 1999, 66). Seiter argues:

> Within the upper-middle-class milieu of the Montessori school, enforcing the ban on television should not be viewed as a marginal part of Sara's job or a personal idiosyncrasy. The TV ban is – as Sara herself believes it to be – a crucial element of her work. Its justification in terms of theories of childhood development masks a more class-conscious motivation, that of distinguishing these

> children and their education from that of the common mass … Television is a key symbol in the very explicit taste- and class-distancing that the school provides. (1999, 69)

Another case study contrasts upper-middle-class and less affluent parents with regards to their attitude's towards their children's television viewing. Seiter notes that the former were more likely to view their child's involvement with television as "active" in choice-making, while those from less privileged positions voiced more concerns regarding the negative influences of television. Although Seiter finds some differences among middle-class parents, the expression of such differences is indirect as the respondents involved are primarily concerned with television as it relates to their children rather than to themselves.

Scholarship addressing "quality" television and middle-class audiences during the multichannel transition raises several important questions. If audience reception of "quality" texts is a cult mode of engagement defined in opposition to television's low-status, what does audience reception look like when the medium becomes culturally legitimated? What happens to the middle-class audience's tenuous relationship with television when the medium's status rises? Does a viewer's position within the middle-class relate to changing audience reception practices?

Theory:

To answer such questions, this research uses the theoretical framework associated with critical audience analysis. The contemporary tradition of critical media audience analysis can largely be traced back to scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. Scholars from a variety of fields including Stuart Hall, David Morley, Angela

McRobbie, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige and Roger Silverstone began addressing media audiences not as isolated phenomena, but as individuals and groups of individuals who must be studied in the context of the rest of their lives, and whose nature as a part of the media audience is only one segment of an overall set of cultural practices which characterize their identities. Also emphasized in cultural audience work has been the multi-layered nature of texts as well as the complexity of how they are received. Cultural audience researchers have drawn from semiotic and hermeneutic approaches to text analysis to make clear the multi-textured nature of media "messages." Formerly treated as fixed and transparent, media messages themselves are now understood as complex and multi-textured. Perhaps the first work to bring together textual and audience analysis from these new, critical perspectives was Hall's (1980) essay about television reception "Encoding/Decoding." In this work, Hall theorizes both the complex nature of the meanings "encoded" primarily in the television text, and the necessarily separate, but equally complex nature of the process by which viewers decode these messages.

Applying Hall's model to British television audiences, Morley (1980) finds that viewers' relationships to television news vary with social location. Even a supposedly "objective" news show, Morley found, was open to different interpretations, made by different types of audiences. While bank managers "shared the commonsense framework of assumptions of Nationwide to such an extent that what was said in the programme was so noncontroversial to them as to be almost invisible," shop stewards (trade unionists) "reject the programme's attempt to tell us what 'our grouse' is and its attempt to construct a national 'we'" (Morley 1992, 111, 117). Yet, Morley argues that such relationships should not be understood as deterministic. Instead of

understanding audience reception as a product of a viewer's class identity, occupation, or education, a viewer's relationship to television "is always a question of how social position plus particular discourse positions produce specific readings, which are structured because the structure of access to different discourses is determined by social position" (Morley 1992, 118).

The most relevant discourses in relation to post-network television's elevated status are the legitimating discourses that align the medium with the traits of more culturally validated forms. According to Newman and Levine (2012), "One of the central strategies employed in discourses of television's legitimation is comparison with already legitimated art forms, such as literature and cinema" (4). They explain:

> Deep immersion in a season of a premium cable drama like *The Sopranos* is thus described by analogy to reading a thick nineteenth-century social realist novel by Balzac, Dickens, or Tolstoy. But the more ubiquitous legitimating strategy is cinematization: certain kinds of television and certain modes of experiencing television content are aligned with movies and the experience of movies. (5)

In addition, "television is legitimated when it no longer resembles television" (Newman and Levine 2012, 29). Unlike the crassly commercial network-era executive producer commanding a team of writers and creating content appealing to "a multiplicity of social types at once" (Gitlin 248), the post-network "showrunner" more closely resembles the traditional film director – "an *auteur*: an artist of unique vision whose experiences and personality are expressed through storytelling craft" (Newman and Levine 2012, 38). Discourses that position television showrunners as "*auteurs*" explicitly attempt to bring the medium more closely in line with traditionally highbrow cultural forms. While not an official title, using the term "showrunner" in

reference to the head of television production for texts in a variety of genres ideologically promotes “a strategy of legitimation” by “calling attention to the artistic status of comedies and dramas promoted and consumed as *authored* [italics in original] texts” (Newman and Levine 2012, 39). Like 1960s film directors' self promotion as artists (Baumann 2007, 64–66), showrunners employing this strategy and critics who repeat such assertions rely on tropes of authorship familiar from older, already legitimated and aestheticized cultural forms including Romantic notions of the author as guarantee of art.

Similarly, the elevated status of single-camera situation comedies like NBC's *The Office* and ABC's *Modern Family* is related to the belief that this visual style is more cinematic than multiple-camera shows like CBS's *Two and a Half Men* (64).[16] In the case of prime-time dramas

16 Unlike the multi-camera sitcoms that have historically defined the genre from *I Love Lucy* to *Friends* and contemporary shows like *Big Bang Theory* that still film entire episodes like staged plays before a live audience, many post-network sitcoms like ABC's *Modern Family* (2009–) and NBC's *Parks and Recreation* (2009-) use the single-camera style, with faux-documentary cinematography including intentionally shaky camera work, frequent refocusing and re-framing as marks of cinematic authenticity. In addition, the single-camera style has largely abandoned the laugh track and the live studio audience through the use of camerawork and editing as a source of humor to replace the audible cues provided by multiple-camera sitcoms. Yet, as Newman and Levine note, “Discursively, the distance between Hollywood film practice and traditional sitcom practice is ripe for exploiting when the single-camera style is offered as an upgrade. The cultural status of film vis-a-vis television add cachet to the new sitcom style when its characteristics are understood as cinematic, and thus anti-televisual” (2012, 69). Nevertheless, the critical acclaim and passionate fan bases associated with Emmy-winning comedies like *Sex and the City*, *The Office*, and *30 Rock* has not translated to large Nielsen ratings. In particular, the cancellation of cult hit Arrested Development was “a sign that the vanguard of TV comedy would be at odds with the economic logic of network programming, and that the aesthetic value of an innovative program could be measured by the mass audience's rejection of it.” Thus, “The upscaling of the situation comedy form through stylistic innovation is matched by the upscaling of the sitcom audience from 'mass' to 'class.'” As Newman and Levine explain, post-network sitcom is “caught between the old ideas of television as the least objectionable programming for the largest possible and thus unsophisticated audience and the new narrowcast appeals of a convergence-era medium” (2012, 74). In this cultural context, Newman and Levine assert that Chuck Lorre's *Two and a Half Men* epitomizes the mass/class divide as the CBS show is “widely despised by elites, whose distaste … effectively marks their social and cultural positioning” and has a “reputation among fans of Quality TV as more or less unwatchable tripe is a stark contrast against its embrace by the largest audience for comedy on television” (2012, 74).

shown on premium cable channels like *The Sopranos* on HBO, the absence of commercial interruptions allow these texts to seem cinematic in comparison to typical network dramas. In fact, original series produced by premium cable networks have accrued more prestige that any other type of programming in the post-network era.

Professional critics play a central role in the propagation of legitimating discourse. As "cultural intermediaries" (Bourdieu 1984, 325), critics help create broader social views of what constitutes good or bad television. Furthermore, their approach to evaluating television frequently reflects the dominant cultural hierarchy and its views on mass and popular culture. As legitimating discourses seek to align television with highbrow culture,[17] it becomes possible for middle-class audiences to treat television as a form of cultural capital.[18]

In one sense, doing so necessitates that middle-class audiences understand television as

17 According to Levine (1988), the term "highbrow" was first used in the 1880s in reference to intellectual or aesthetic superiority; the term lowbrow, first used shortly after 1900, referring to "someone or something neither 'highly intellectual' or 'aesthetically refined,' were derived from the phrenological terms 'highbrowed' and 'lowbrowed,' which were prominently featured in the nineteenth-century practice of determining racial types and intelligence by measuring cranial shapes and capacities" (221-222).

18 Although first used to describe the non-monetary assets associated with social and intellectual knowledge in the context of explaining the mechanisms by which social inequality is reproduced by the educational system (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1973), Bourdieu later argues that cultural capital exists in three distinct forms. In its embodied state, "i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu 1986, 282), cultural capital is a "competence" that cannot be separated from the individual who possesses it since in the accumulation "of what is called culture, cultivation, *Bildung* [referring to the German tradition of self-cultivation wherein education serves as a formative process for personality] presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor" (1986, 283). In its objectified state, "material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments, etc." function as cultural capital because their consumption presupposes embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986, 285). In its institutionalized state, as credentials associated with the acquisition of particular competencies and skills in the context of a formal education system, academic qualifications allow embodied cultural capital to acquire objective value in some labor markets. According to Bourdieu, institutionalized cultural capital "makes it possible to compare qualification holders and then to exchange them (by substituting one for another in succession)" (1986, 285–286).

class-appropriate leisure. For example, in her qualitative research exploring the differences between American and French elites, Lamont (1992) finds that upper-middle class American men value any “kind of activity that can be read as a signal of self-actualization” (92) including “play[ing] chess, learn[ing] a musical instrument, exercise, diet[ing], go[ing] to the museum, get[ting] involved in the PTA, sav[ing] the rain forest, [and] tak[ing] classes” (99). Furthermore, as an indication of the desire to maximize one's own potential, leisurely engagement with intellectually demanding cultural forms “can be taken to indirectly signal high ranking on the moral, cultural, and socioeconomic status hierarchies” (Lamont 1992, 100). This orientation explains, in part, why middle class audiences who once considered television a “passive and mediocre” (Lamont 1992, 98) use of leisure time would celebrate “culturally legitimated” post-network television if they believe such content is “'original,' 'edgy,' 'complex,' and 'sophisticated'” (Newman and Levine 2012, 81).[19]

In another sense, the increasing status of post-network television allows some content to acquire value that is similar to that of objectified cultural capital. As Bourdieu (1984) explains, the central mechanism by which the privileged activate their culture resources is by converting them into tastes for high status cultural forms. When these forms are institutionalized within educational systems and consecrated by “cultural intermediaries” such as professional critics, they become “misrecognized” as qualitatively superior and then become imbued with symbolic

19 As Giddens (1991) argues, this conception of leisure is intimately related to the reorganization of time and space that occurs with the onset of modernity and transforms daily life. Specifically, lifestyle choices become increasingly significant for the construction and maintenance of self-identity. In this context, socially marginalized life-style choices, like frequent alcohol and drug abuse, are problematic precisely because they are understood “as an inability to colonize the future and as such transgresses one of the prime concerns with which individuals now reflexively have to cope” (Giddens 1993, 76).

power. Furthermore, such forms are coded in ways that require knowledge and receptive frameworks to fully enjoy their consumption. As a consequence of such social relations, elites activate “objectified” cultural capital through the consumption of cultural objects that require high “virtual” cultural capital to consume successfully (Bourdieu 1986).

Beyond consuming the “right” cultural objects, treating television as a form of cultural capital could also involve middle-class audiences emphasizing the distinctiveness of their consumption practices. A significant body of research asserts that cultural consumption among high-status individuals varies substantially from that of previous eras (Peterson 1992; Peterson and Kern 1996).[20] According to Holt (1997), the breakdown of traditional boundaries separating highbrow and lowbrow culture results in the objectified form of cultural capital being supplanted by the embodied form. He explains, “Class differences in American consumption have gone underground; no longer easily identified with the goods consumed, distinction is becoming more and more a matter of practice” (Holt 1997, 103). Specifically, contemporary forms of embodied cultural capital are reflected in the difference between “critical” and “referential” reception of cultural texts (Holt 1998).

Critical reception is more common among individuals with high levels of cultural capital (“HCCs”). Holt notes, “Applying a formal interpretive lens, HCCs read popular entertainment as entertaining fictions that are potentially edifying but that do not reflect directly the empirical

20 The consumption practices of high-status individuals are commonly understood in terms of Peterson's (1992) “omnivore thesis” which asserts that highbrow cultural engagement and the enjoyment of popular culture are no longer mutually exclusive. Following Peterson's (1992) theoretical lead, scholars have found evidence of the omnivore/univore distinction to reflect musical taste in a variety of countries (Peterson 2005). Based on the diversity of such evidence, several scholars argue that the ability to display omnivorous cultural taste is now the most dominant form of cultural capital (Bryson 1997; V. Friedman and Ollivier 2002).

world" (Holt 1998, 9). Such readings are similar to the Liebes and Katz's (1990) notion of "critical" interpretations. In their study of cross-cultural interpretations of the prime-time soap opera, *Dallas*, Liebes and Katz find that viewers who offer critical interpretations of the show discuss the program as "a fictional construction with aesthetic rules" (100). In addition, critical interpretation involves "awareness either of the semantic or syntactic elements of the text or of the roles of the reader as processor of the text" (117). By semantic criticism, Liebes and Katz mean that viewers might make an inference about the theme of the program or about the producer's narrative aims, or they might reflect on how a show presents reality. By syntactic criticism, they mean that viewers might be aware of generic conventions, of the dramatic function of characters and narrative events, of the economic realities of television production, of their own responses to the program, or of the program as having been constructed.

In contrast, among individuals with low levels of cultural capital ("LCCs"), the value associated with any and all content is closely related to personal identification. Holt describes this as referential reception that applies a "classificatory system used in everyday life to cultural texts" (1998, 9). Referential reception resembles Gans' (1999) notion of the user-oriented public who has little concern for authorship and instead chooses "culture for the feelings and enjoyment it evokes and for the insight and information they can obtain" (104). This public places little stock in critical evaluation instead preferring word-of-mouth judgments from those in their social circles. In addition, referential reception resembles the "middlebrow personalism" Radway (1999) finds in her investigation of The-Book-of-the-Month Club during the 1920s and 1930s.[21]

21 Scholars typically understand "middlebrow" culture to occupy the space between highbrow (legitimate) culture and lowbrow (popular) culture. Yet, such culture does not sit on neutral ground. As Chopra-Gant (2013) observes in the introduction to his analysis of middlebrow television drama *The*

In creating a culture that opposed the highbrow imperatives of academics and professionals, the ideological foundation of middlebrow literary culture is the recognition that reading is a highly variable experience. Thus, the club's selections both require and support a worldview in which taste is a reflection of individual, idiosyncratic selves. In the context of referential reception, the importance of individual subjectivity, what one thinks and feels about a given cultural text, leaves little room for externally validated prestige systems. As a result, status hierarchies are not particularly significant for individuals engaging with culture in this fashion. For those attracted to cultural texts that speak directly to their current life situation, the appeal of a given show that feels "real" can neither be diminished by negative critical evaluations nor elevated by positive ones.

Following a brief description of methodology, this chapter uses critical audience analysis to address post-network audience reception among middle-class young-adults paying particular attention to modes of engagement that align television with highbrow culture (cultural capital) by invoking the discourses of legitimation described by Newman and Levine (2012). In addition, this chapter also pays particular attention to claims regarding distinctive consumption practices as recent research indicates that "the mode of relating to culture may be more important in the games of distinction that the precise choice of cultural objects themselves" (Prieur and Savage 2013, 258).

Methods:

Waltons (CBS, 1972-1981), "For as much as 'high' and 'low' culture stand in opposition to one another, both also stand in opposition to an intermediate term – 'middlebrow' culture – from which both camps seek distinction" (5).

The qualitative interview data presented below was gathered from a snowball sample of nineteen middle-class young-adults. According to Skeggs, Thumin, and Wood (2008), methodologies should vary with the socioeconomic class of the audience as the ability to display self-reflexivity and comfort in an interview setting is much more common among middle-class women when compared to working-class women. As such, the choice to employ qualitative interviews is appropriate given the educational attainment and occupations of the respondents.

Participants were primarily recruited through word of mouth and were not compensated. Data collection occurred at a variety of physical locations depending on individual availability and preference. Although semi-structured, each interview typically began with a description of the respondent's childhood experiences with television and ended with a discussion of contemporary experiences. Interviews lasting between 60-90 minutes were digitally recorded and transcribed by the author. The interview schedule is included in the appendix. Field-notes were taken after each interview. Interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic text analysis method (King 2004; Titscher et al. 2000), combining the use of deductive coding (based on generic television topics covered in the interviews) and inductive coding following a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Demographically, all respondents are between 22 and 33 years-old. As such, this sample includes the oldest members of the “millennial generation” (P. Taylor and Keeter 2010) and the youngest members of “generation X” (Ortner 1998). Nine are men, ten are women, and none identify as queer. All are phenotypically white. All respondents have internet access at home. Seventeen respondents pay for cable television. Fourteen use a digital video recorder. All report

having past experience watching programming on DVD, the internet, and television.

Theoretical conceptions and empirical definitions of class continue to be the subject of debate among neo-Weberian (Goldthorpe and McKnight 2006), neo-Durkheimian (Grusky and Galescu 2005), and culturalist (Savage 2000) camps. In America, this is further complicated since individuals of all economic backgrounds tend to subjectively identify themselves as middle-class in response to survey questions (Adair 2001). Similarly, when self-reporting class in response to an open-ended question, a majority describe themselves as middle-class (Hout 2008). Not surprisingly, as a result of this “widespread tendency for Americans to identify with the middle class,” individual's “subjective class identity often does not correspond to the objective class position” associated with their life chances (Sosnaud, Brady, and Frenk 2013, 83).

Given these issues, I argue that all the respondents in this sample come from middle class socioeconomic backgrounds that can be located somewhere along the spectrum between the “lower middle class” and the “upper-middle class.” Although she observes that the “lower middle class” is “a messy, contradictory amalgam of symbolic practices, structures of feeling, and forms of life,” Felski also notes that the category “usually includes both the traditional petite bourgeoisie of shop owners, small business people, and farmers and the 'new' lower middle class of salaried employees, such as clerical workers, technicians, and secretaries” (2000, 35). In contrast, Lamont (1992) defines the upper-middle class as “college-educated professionals, managers, and businessmen” explaining:

> This group includes professionals and semiprofessionals such as social workers, librarians, elementary and secondary schoolteachers. The managerial group comprises executives, middle-level managers, and administrators in the public and

> nonprofit sectors. The businessmen include self-employed professionals and the owners of businesses of various sizes" (14).

In this sample, sixteen of the nineteen respondents have at least one parent with a college degree. Among the three remaining respondents, two have parents with white collar occupations and the third's family owns a small chain of grocery stores. Moreover, among respondents without college degrees of their own, all had the opportunity to further their educations and chose not to for a variety of reasons.

As all respondents have socioeconomic backgrounds that can be considered middle-class, the sample is divided by educational attainment and occupational status. Individuals with any amount of post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered "privileged" middle-class young-adults. Occupations are considered high-status if they have scores above eighty on the Nam–Powers–Boyd Occupational Status Scale (Nam and Boyd 2004).[22] Young-adults without post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered non-privileged. Of the nineteen respondents in this sample, ten are privileged and nine are non-privileged. Regarding gender, five of the ten privileged respondents are women and four of the nine non-privileged are women.

Findings:

In this sample, middle-class young-adults with post-graduate education or high-status occupations understand post-network television as a cultural form worthy of their time and attention. These privileged respondents intellectualize television content and make qualitative

22 The list of occupations with scores above eighty is included in the appendix.

distinctions between different types of content. In addition, they use particular knowledge as bonding and bridging capital while emphasizing the distinctiveness of their consumption practices. In contrast, middle-class young-adults without post-graduate education or a high-status occupation resemble middle-class audiences' discourses about television during the multi-channel transition. They have similarly tenuous relationships to television. In the context of these tenuous relationships, television's increasing status is not significant. Rather, their engagement with television is indicative of referential reception practices. As Liebes and Katz (1990) note, when making referential readings, "viewers relate to characters as real people and in turn relate these real people to their own real worlds" (100). In addition, television shows are often treated as windows on the world, and as extensions of the viewers' own world, so that connections may be made between the world as perceived and as known. In such instances, viewers regard the program as "real" rather than constructed, and so are more inclined to accept and take for granted the naturalized meanings in the text that a critical reading would have made explicit.

In the final subsection below, I address audience reception of reality TV. As a genre, reality TV was not prominent during the multichannel transition. In addition, scholars disagree about what should be considered the first American reality TV show. Furthermore, there is no empirical research addressing the relationship between middle-class audiences and what little reality TV was available. The findings indicate that middle-class young-adults' relationships with reality television resemble their relationships with post-network television more broadly.

Privileged Middle-Class Young-Adults

Table 2.1: Privileged Middle-Class Young-Adults

	Name, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity	Highest Degree	Occupation	Father's Occupation (Highest Degree)	Mother's Occupation (Highest Degree)
1	Brent, 26, M, white	BA	engineer[1]	analyst (HS)	analyst (HS)
2	Carl, 22, M, white	BA	manager[2]	machinist (HS)	accountant (BA)
3	Carrie, 26, F, white	JD	attorney	attorney (JD)	doctor (MD)
4	Dan, 24, M, white	BA	marketing[3]	doctor (MD)	teacher (JD)
5	Dani, 26, F, white	MA	teacher	mil. officer (MA)	unemployed (HS)
6	Frank, 24, M, white	BA	grad. student	lobbyist (PhD)	professor (PhD)
7	Haley, 24, F, white	MA	teacher	accountant (BS)	architect (MA)
8	Jarrod, 26, M, white	MBA	engineer	attorney (JD)	real estate (MA)
9	Sara, 25, F, white	BA	grad. student	doctor (MD)	nurse (BA)
10	Wanda, 23, F, white	MA	teacher	executive (PhD)	administrator (BA)

1 Computer software engineer, NPB score 94, rank 7.
2 Financial manager, NPB score 86, rank 15.
3 Market and survey researchers, NPB score 87, rank 14.

The privileged middle-class young-adults in this sample embrace post-network television. Specifically, their discussions of the medium include frequent assertions regarding the intellectual value of particular content. These assertions often reference the quality of a given show's writing. When discussing *The Simpsons*, a show watched by her family as a child, Claire, a married twenty-six year old attorney, recalls:

> Actually, we did watch that [*The Simpsons*]as a family, quite often, because dad loved it, thought it was funny and would laugh and the siblings all loved it, and even my little brother who was too young to really get most of the jokes, he thought it was fun because there was like slapstick and cartoons . . . I mean because my dad would get the sort of more sophisticated jokes and the rest of us would the other jokes you could pick up on, and at the end of the day it was a cartoon but I actually think it's a genius show now. It's just very well-written. There are a lot of sophisticated jokes. They tend to, they try to do things that are, sort of, in the news, or at least like reference them and yeah … I just think it's well-written.

In addition to *The Simpsons*, Claire also referenced the quality of the writing in discussing several other shows including *The Sopranos*, HBO's *The Wire*, and AMC's *Mad Men*. For Dan, a 25 year-old marketing executive at a prominent social networking company, these issues define his television preferences. Discussing Comedy Central's *South Park*, he explains, "I think it's intelligent. I love the satire. I love the writing. I think it's incredibly well done . . . It's exactly the kind of show I like to watch."

As with traditional forms of cultural capital, the ability to recognize some content as "better" than others is significant. For example, when discussing his favorite show, Frank, a twenty-five year-old MBA candidate, claims, "Whatever you expect to see on regular TV, *The Shield* is going to do the opposite. That's why it's better." Yet, asserting the qualitative superiority

of some content quickly bleeds into assertions regarding the superiority of some audiences. Discussing *Southpark*, for example, Frank recalls, “I watched the show with my friends from college, or like my friends from home and were all like, 'Wow, how smart is this? Like oh my god, this is brilliant social commentary.' But then Joe Schmo [imaginary audience member] thinks its funny that a kid pooped himself. So its very different.” Similarly, Dan claims, “I try not to watch stupid television … [and] *Seinfeld* to me, is an intelligent show.” He explains, “*Seinfeld* specifically, is basically a show that everyone can relate to, but I relate to it in an intelligent way … I consider it intellectually stimulating.”As such, the relationship some of the privileged respondents in this sample have with television can be understood as acts of middle-class value accrual in lines with Bourdieu's (1987) arguments regarding the formation of social classes.[23]

When claiming that post-network television has intellectual value, particular knowledge is often deployed as a form of bonding capital which, according to Putnam (2000), strengthens interpersonal relations between similarly located individuals. Specifically, privileged middle-class young-adults frequently mention showrunners and understand them to be artists whose craft is television. As an example, Frank's thoughts about HBO's *Da Ali G Show* and its creator, Sacha Baron Cohen, are instructive:

> I see it, you know its funny, I watch the show and thought the show was smart and funny before I knew that. And then it was almost kind of like, I remember hearing it, and it was almost like a “dude

23 For Bourdieu (1987) value accrual is a strategic imperative (playing the game), a structuring mechanism organized into a habitus generated from birth through access and inclusion to and from fields for exchange and thus possibilities for accumulating value. In general, the middle-class maintains its status by protecting its interest through processes of legitimation which include symbolic boundary-making as “the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions” (Bourdieu 1987, 13), limiting access to the mechanisms of symbolic power vis a vis the educational system, and obscuring the knowledge (power relations) that underpin the means by which individuals accrue the “right” combination of social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital.

> get this – not only is it this but he is this – *just like us*, you know, how much funnier is it that he is a really smart Jew also" – that is exactly how it was said to me when we were watching [the] "Throw the Jew Down the Well" video. And I was just laughing, near defecating myself and somebody was like "you know what's even funnier, this guy went to Cambridge [University] and he's Jewish." And I was just like wow – that makes this so much better.

In this context, knowledge about the background of a show's creator serves as an important piece of cultural capital as well as a source of personal identification. Although not Jewish himself, Frank, a phenotypically white Arab christian with family in Lebanon, clearly identifies with Cohen's elite educational status and cultural status as a member of an ethnic minority. It seems the ability to identify with the background of television producers in this way produces a particular kind of status that is necessarily associated with being "just like us."

The privileged young-adults in this sample also use particular knowledge to emphasize the distinctiveness of their consumption practices. This often occurs in relation to intertextual references.[24] In the broadest sense, the term "intertextuality" refers to the ways in which the

24 In describing the emergence of television's second golden age during the 1980s and 1990s, Robert Thompson characterizes "quality TV" as "literary and writer-based" and notes the frequent use of highbrow cultural allusions in shows like *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) and *Picket Fences* (1992-1996) while asserting that "the classier cultural references … serve to distance these programs from the stigmatized medium and to announce that they are superior to the typical trash available on television" (1997, 14–15). The dominant theoretical understanding of intertextuality in cable crime drama is that highbrow references serve as a means to appeal to elite audiences. Film scholar Dana Polan (2009), for example, argues that the use of highbrow allusions in *The Sopranos* is particularly important in the context of the relationship between Tony Soprano and his psychiatrist Dr. Jennifer Melfi (played by Lorraine Bracco). In "Fortunate Son" (S03E03), while standing in his deceased mother's kitchen eating cold cuts from Satriale's Pork Store, the audience sees Tony experience a flashback to his childhood in which he witnesses his father cut off Mr. Satriale's pinky as punishment for failing to pay a gambling debt. At the conclusion of this flashback, the show cuts to Melfi's office where Tony is telling her about what he remembers. Melfi provokes another flashback during this therapy session and the audience sees the young Tony experience his first panic attack as a consequence of being forced to come to terms with both the violence associated with his father's occupation and his parents' sexuality. The show then cuts back to Melfi's office and she claims that the cold cuts are "[k]ind of like Proust's madeleines." In response to Tony's confusion, Melfi continues, "Marcel Proust. Wrote a seven-volume classic, Remembrance of Things Past. He took a bite of a

meaning of a particular text is shaped by other texts. Originally coined by Kristeva (1967), contemporary scholars use the term in a variety of contexts for a variety of purposes ranging "from those faithful to Kristeva's original vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence" (Irwin 2004, 227–228). In the sub-field of television studies, intertextuality has a long history extending back to Raymond Williams' (1974) work on flow and John Fiske's (1988) exploration of the distinction between horizontal and vertical intertextualities. In relation to television's elevated cultural status, intertextual references are particularly significant as they demand active viewing and provide viewers with opportunities to demonstrate high levels of knowledge. When discussing *The Simpsons*, for example, Jarrod, a 27 year old software engineer, takes a great deal of pride in his ability to claim that, "When they make a reference, I never miss [it]." In discussing the appeal of *Family Guy*, Claire also links the pleasure derived from the viewing experience with the ability to understand the show's often obscure references. After using a hand motion to indicate that some references are over her head, she asserts, "For the most part, the [references] that I do get are awesome and [*Family Guy* is] like genius once you get it."

Privileged middle-class young-adults also use post-network content as a form of bridging capital (Putnam 2000) when interacting with individuals believed to be outside their own niche audience. Specifically, these respondents engage with a variety of television content and report that there are social benefits from doing so. For example, the need to be informed about a variety

madeleine -- a kind of tea cookie he used to have when he was a child -- and that one bite unleashed a tide of memories of his childhood and ultimately, his entire life." Tony quickly replies, "This sounds very gay. I hope you're not saying that." The inclusion of Proust in this scene allows "the viewer who gets the reference" to "both feel superior to Tony and be impressed by his talent at clearing away the verbiage and getting to the core of the situation" (Polan 2009, 52-53).

of television content often takes Frank into parts of the television landscape far from the crime dramas and animated/live-action comedies he prefers. When asked about the kinds of television shows he often discusses with people outside his immediate social circle which is primarily populated by similarly privileged young men, Frank claims to be reactionary:

> I tend to mold myself to their interests because, like I said, I find that I can relate to something on some level or have something to say about most things that I see on television. I don't necessarily get into it. I'm not a fan of everything that I talk about but I have something to say even if it's just a pro or a con. Very rarely is someone like "I like this" and I don't know what they are talking about . . . Worst case scenario, I can make a joke about how I don't watch it . . .

Although it seems unlikely that anyone could have seen everything available in the post-network environment, Frank expresses his belief that there are social benefits associated with a diverse television diet. Similarly, Claire claims that awareness of popular television is important because "it can create a sense of, like, commonality between people that might have nothing in common otherwise. She adds, "You don't have to watch the show necessarily, but just like know what's going on." For both Claire and Frank, being aware of television content they claim to find personally unappealing is useful as cultural capital when crossing social boundaries. In these instances, bridging work includes and values some popular television content as a form of multicultural capital (Bryson 1996).

Non-Privileged Middle-Class Young-Adults: TV as Bad Cultural Object

Like middle-class audiences during the multichannel transition, middle-class young-adults without post-graduate education or a high-status occupation have tenuous relationships

Table 2.2: Non-Privileged Middle-Class Young-Adults

	Name, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity	Highest Degree	Occupation	Father's Occupation (Highest Degree)	Mother's Occupation (Highest Degree)
1	Andy, 24, M, white	BA	unemployed	professor (PhD)	civil service (HS)
2	Carol, 25, F, white	BA	bartender	realtor (HS)	librarian (HS)
3	Dante, 25, M, white	BA	researcher	civil service (HS)	librarian (BA)
4	Kathy, 28, F, white	BA	bartender	teacher (BA)	teacher (MA)
5	Leah, 25, F, white	BA	graphic design	executive (PhD)	administrator (BA)
6	John, 29, M, white	HS	chef	teacher (BA)	administrator (HS)
7	Julia, 28, F, white	HS	manager	engineer (BA)	administrator (BA)
8	Kent, 27, M, white	HS*	chef	business owner (HS)	bookkeeper (HS)
9	Ruby, 23, F, white	HS*	bartender	musician (HS)	teacher (BA)

*some college

with television. On one hand, television is understood to be a bad cultural object, laden with negative associations held over from the network era. On the other hand, television is enjoyable. As a result of these conflicting imperatives, respondents frequently describe watching television as indulging in a taboo. Kate, a bartender, largely considers the act of watching to be awasted opportunity. She says, “You know, it's like, however many hours, times, however many days of my life I spent just like not doing anything except letting my brain rot a little bit.” Carol, who also works as a bartender, claims that watching her favorite shows makes her feel guilty. Discussing *One Tree Hill*, *Life Unexpected*, and *Gossip Girl*, which she describes as “pretty much all the same type of show” in that each narrative is driven by “high school drama that goes towards, that might develop into college drama,” she has a difficult time explaining the appeal of these shows:

> I don't know what I think I find valuable. I don't know why like them. I know that they are awful. If I have people over, or if like I am dating anybody and they are there, or just like when girlfriends come over I can't watch those shows with other people because I know how bad they are. But like I won't miss five seconds of it to talk to my friends so I have to like DVR it and watch them secretly … it's like my guilty pleasure I suppose.

When asked what she meant by “guilty,” Carol explains, “I feel a little silly about it. I feel a little like silly that I still watch shows that fifteen year-old girls watch.” Julia, a restaurant manager, claims that she sometimes feels bad about watching “the vampire shows.” When asked why she feels bad about that, she replies, “because they're terrible and mindless and just terrible.” Such comments parallel research addressing television audiences during the multi-channel transition. As Seiter (1999) observes, audiences who “rely heavily on television as a media form are

vulnerable to recognizing a judgment from above of television as trash" (27). In this context, forms of apology or guilt about watching television can be understood as symptoms of "symbolic violence," which Bourdieu defines as "the violence which is excercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 167).

Discussing her television viewing more broadly, Julia invokes the notion of flow to explain her consumption. Although she admits that she should spend more time reading, she nonetheless minimizes the impact of her TV watching by noting that she is unwilling to organize her time around television. She claims, "It's just that I feel I should read more versus watching just TV even though I try to justify it because most the time I watch movies and reruns. So it's not like I'm sitting in front of the TV on like a schedule." This is an interesting inversion of the typical post-network discourses regarding audience control and appointment viewing. As a form of audience behavior, appointment viewing refers to a "special case of active program selection" (Wonneberger, Schoenbach, and van Meurs 2011, 327) when individuals watch television at a specific time. Whereas middle class television audiences have historically condemned working class audiences for their continuous television use (Lembo 2000), here Julie seems to be condemning the practice of "appointment viewing" on the basis that such behavior reflects a willingness to temporally structure one's life in relation to television.

Nonetheless, like Julia, many middle-class respondents juxtapose reading with television watching. Kent, a chef who earned an associates degree at a technical school for motor-sports engineering, offers a rather typical claim, "I read every chance I get and a lot of times there's not shit on TV there to watch so I will end up reading for like six hours so I think I keep a pretty

healthy balance. But I definitely hold reading above looking at the boob tube, if you know what I mean." John, a cook, expresses a similar attitude. He says, I can still like read a book in like two days. I will sit down and spend way too much of my free time reading a book and I like that better [than television] because I can have my own … I can make my own movie in my brain." Later in the interview he elaborates, "That is why I read books so much because it will take me to some [other] place." When asked if he would always rather be reading a book than watching TV, he replies, "It all depends. I am such a big fan of sports so it's hard to say. I would rather watch sports than reality TV. I could easily just put that out of my life and read a book. If you come out with a good book I will read that." Furthermore, John reports that he recently took some time away from television explaining, "Yeah, the whole getting away from it for a while was really nice. Like I have got books that I have read three times and now I have books I have read five times." Surprisingly, John offers little about the books to which he is referring. When probed, he says, "I read a lot of poetry now … [from] the Bukowski era." He adds, "And I have read every book that Hunter S. Thompson has ever done at least six times." This extended discussion of books and reading implies that John feels it is necessary to separate himself from the less educated, presumably lower-status population of American non-readers.[25]

Collectively, non-privileged middle-class young-adults' discussions that position television as a bad cultural object and watching as a less worthwhile use of leisure time than reading indicate the limited significance of the medium's rising cultural status. This interpretation is supported by these respondents' understandings of premium cable original series. When

25 Americans between the ages of twenty and thirty-four spend an average of 123 minutes watching television in comparison to just 8.1 minutes readings on weekdays (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014).

explaining what they find pleasurable about watching this type of show, value is closely related to the middle-class audience member's ability to personally identify with the on-screen content. Discussing her favorite premium cable original series, HBO's *True Blood*, Carol says, “It's like vamp porn kind of. I mean there is tons of sex, tons of violence . . . yeah it's gory and gross and with tons and tons and tons of super nude sex scenes all the time.” However, as she continued, it became clear that her feelings about *True Blood* are based on more than a taste for sex and violence. She asserts:

> I don't want to watch anything to learn. I don't really watch TV all that often well unless I just bought like a box set of something that I'm trying to get into like *True Blood* which I watched all three seasons of in the past probably three weeks or month or something.

This comment stands in stark contrast to the privileged middle-class young-adults who intellectualize television content.

Another way in which non-privileged middle-class young-adults identify with post-network content is by engaging with shows they feel are “real.” When describing the most appealing aspects of his favorite premium cable original series, HBO's *Treme*, a drama set in New Orleans during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Kent says:

> You don't leave, you just rebuild you know? You just make do and fix it and rebuild and stay there and keep the culture and the music and everything else that's down there. I mean, that is one of the heartbeats of music and culture that America has way beyond any other place around, you know?

Here, he uses a moral framework privileging his work ethic to explain the emotional appeal of a particular television program. In responding to a follow-up question, he elaborates, “*Treme* was just a great expression of what New Orleans means to me and to the rest of America.” As Kent

continues, however, it becomes clear that *Treme*'s appeal has little to do with what "New Orleans means" for "the rest of America." He explains, "The story of New Orleans is a wonderful story and I pride myself on being a Southern man and that story just kind of speaks to me." Despite the invocation of a collective identity, preference remains primarily at the level of the individual.

Television's elevated cultural status is not addressed is not addressed in the context of referential reception. When asked if he ever watches any premium cable original series, John replies, "I watched *The Wire* because it has Steve Earle on it."[26] This is rather notable as Earle only appears in eight of *The Wire*'s sixty episodes. He explains, "He is one of my favorite singers. He is ornery well maybe not that… What is a better word for being an asshole? … I like what I like and if I don't like it I don't watch it. I like things because people I like are in it." Discussing *The Sopranos*, Kent offers his disapproval, "To be honest with you I wasn't a real big *Sopranos* fan. I didn't even watch them." When asked follow-up questions about *The Sopranos*, it becomes apparent that, like Holt's "LCCs," Kent's referential interpretation leads him "to dislike programs, movies, and music whose characters, plots, and lyrics conflict with their worldview or remind them of disturbing past experiences" (1998: 10). He explains:

> I was a rebel when I was a kid, a teenager and [during] my younger 20s, and I got into a lot of trouble and ran from flashing [police] lights a lot. I don't like reliving that, you know? I don't want to put up with any problems like that, you know like negativity so I guess when I am picking what I want to watch on TV, I kind of steer clear of anything that is negative or trouble causing. It's just that I don't like it.

26 Steve Earle is an American rock, country and folk singer-songwriter, record producer, author and actor. He is also a recovering heroin addict. In *The Wire,* he plays Walon, an HIV-positive recovering drug addict who is a recurring but not regular character. In addition, Earle's version of Tom Waits' song "Way Down in the Hole" was the theme song for the show's fifth season.

When asked about *Breaking Bad* later in the interview,[27] similar issues emerge, “It was interesting but it was like the same kind of thing where it's just like illegal, you know, the illegal activity, the running from cops kind of thing just makes me uneasy and I don't enjoy it.”

Negative feelings about premium cable original series are also explained in terms of boredom. When asked is she ever watches anything on HBO, Ruby, a twenty-three year-old bartender, recalls, “I did start to watch *The Wire* more so because I'm from Baltimore and I felt like, obligated. [But] I couldn't get past the sixth episode. I thought it was so boring to start off with.” Answering a similar question, Carol says, “I tried to get into *The Sopranos* or into *The Wire* but I didn't really like it.” Asked to elaborate, she continues, “I guess I had somebody's box set and I was like trying to watch episodes, like the first three episodes or something, and I think I fell asleep every time I try to watch it.” When asked what she remembers about *The Wire*, she replies, “I don't know, I just remember like it was city kids and burglars and cops. There were too many characters, I don't know, and I just fell asleep.” Given the connection between notions of a third golden age and original cable series, such responses are particularly significant. Although such issues will be discussed at length in subsequent chapters, here, it necessary to briefly note that *The Wire* and *The Sopranos* are often discussed as the “best” shows to ever appear on American television (Traister and Miller 2007; Zoller Seitz 2012). In this context, the lack of interest in these shows is a rejection of the shows themselves and implies a lack of knowledge regarding the prestige system that places *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* atop post-network television's status hierarchies.

27 *Breaking Bad* is not a premium cable series. Yet, as will be discussed below, its inclusion here is appropriate.

Although eight of non-privileged young-adults in this sample have tenuous relationships with television and are largely unconcerned with the medium's elevated status, one respondent's reception practices differ dramatically. In fact, Andy's orientation to television includes several of the characteristics displayed by privileged middle-class young-adults. When explaining why he enjoys *The Sopranos*, for example, this unemployed twenty-five year-old with a bachelor's degree references the show's creator by name. He says, "I like the mafia theme…they're very… you can relate very easily to them because [David] Chase has done such a good job developing the characters there." In addition, Andy values the ability to decode highly intertextual content. For example, after discussing the importance of using memorable references appropriately, he strongly expresses his displeasure with those who do not feel the same way, "And I hate when people continue to make the wrong reference over and over again. It pisses me off I don't like it – say it right or don't say it at all. People who might not know the show very well like to chime in just cause it's the cool thing to do – a little poser." In addition, Andy emphasizes the distinctiveness of his own consumption practices. Discussing *Chappelle's Show*, Andy recalls that after the show exploded into broader cultural consciousness, inappropriate forms of audience reception detracted from his pleasure.[28] He says, "And once its discovered it's just like

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28 Created by stand-up comedian Dave Chappelle, *Chappelle's Show* features a series of sketches and a musical performance in each thirty minute episode. The sketches often include recurring characters played by the show's eponymous host. From the beginning, Chappelle's Show was a ratings success for Comedy Central. The show's premier was the highest rated debut on Comedy Central since 2001's short-lived "*That's My Bush!*" (Fitzgerald 2003). Yet, by the end of its second season, it was the highest rated show on any any network in the Wednesday 1030pm time slot among the most coveted demographic group, men ages 18-34 (Wallenstein 2004). In addition, in 2004, Chappelle's Show was the best selling TV show DVD (Masurat 2004). Observers note, that in part, the significant jump in popularity is related to one sketch in particular. The fourth episode of the second season, which aired on February 11, 2004, included a the debut of a recurring series of sketches titled "Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories." Hosted by Charlie Murphy, brother to superstar Eddie Murphy, the two part sketch includes dramatized re-enactments of several encounters with the musician Rick James during

everything else, it gets fucked up. *Chappelle's Show* was great for a time and then 'I'm Rick James, bitch!' killed some of that. Because that was an hysterical skit, 'Fuck yo' couch!,' … and Chappelle, I think because of people like that, those posers, went nuts."

Interestingly, the belief that it was those fans shouting catchphrases that ruined *Chappelle's Show* and led to Chappelle's hiatus is common among journalists. According to one *Vulture* writer, "... the sketch, and that line in particular, was the beginning of the end" (Fox 2014). Similarly, Rubin (2014) asserts, the sketch "began the commodification of *Chappelle's Show* by the people who would be interrupting Dave's comedy act with catcalls of 'I'm Rick James, bitch!' for years to come. (And make no mistake: We blame them for the show's ultimate unraveling.)." Guerrero (2014)offers a slightly different interpretation noting, "[The sketch] was really, really funny the first few times you saw it, but it got kind of beaten up over the years by all the people who took it way too far, and the people who started acting like the sketch wasn't good in the first place because they hated that first group of people."

As a viewer, Andy's reception practices more closely resemble those of privileged middle-class young-adults. His feelings about *Chappelle's Show* are nearly identical to those common among cultural elites like the journalists quoted above. In addition, there is little reason to believe that Andy reflects non-privileged middle-class young-adults more generally. Rather, Andy reflects the inherent drawbacks of the particular construction of middle-class status

the 1980s, played by Chappelle. Although it included many well-delivered punchlines, the sketch is most closely associated with the phrase, "I'm Rick James, bitch!" Almost instantly, it seemed, *Chappelle's Show* became a phenomenon. As on writer describes, "Very early in the days of social media — Facebook was weeks old — people shared the sketch any way they could, whether it was through MySpace, AIM away messages, or just shouting 'I'm Rick James, bitch' so often that people had to go home and see what they were talking about" adding that "'I'm Rick James, bitch' possessed a level of quotability that wasn't duplicated, on college campuses especially, until Borat had a wife" (Fox 2014).

employed in this research. At the time of his interview, Andy was unemployed. In fact, his only work experience was a three-month internship. He had no graduate education. Furthermore, his father is a retired professor, an occupational category associated with high levels of cultural capital, and his mother is a retired civil servant. Using these structural categories, Andy is a non-privileged middle-class young-adult.

Yet, when one considers Andy's actual economic and cultural resources, such a designation makes little sense. Andy has attended private schools from kindergarten through college. His bachelor's degree is from a non-selective small liberal arts college where tuition is nearly fifty thousand dollars per year. His limited work experience was a three-month internship with a European financial firm that required substantial travel and out-of-pocket expenses (including temporary relocation to the European city where the firm is based). He lives in the one of the wealthiest zip codes in one of the nation's wealthiest metropolitan areas. With a substantial amount of family wealth at his disposal, Andy can afford to remain unemployed.

To avoid such classification problems, a potential alternative to the structural definition of class used in this research is the perspective of "cultural class analysis" (Devine and Savage 2000). Using several of Bourdieu's key concepts, this perspective addresses the complicated and interrelated connections between lived experience, social class and identity.[29] As Lawler explains,

29 In a theoretical sense, cultural class analysis can be divided into two camps. Scholars of the first camp including Atkinson (2010), Sayer (2005), and Skeggs (1997), which Flemmen describes as the "social space approach" (2013, 327), utilize Bourdieu's notion of social space as "a social topology … an analysis of relative positions and of the objective relations between these positions" reflecting the most significant elements of differentiation regarding the overall composition of a given agents' capital (1989, 16). This perspective uses a concept of class which could be defined as referring to positions, or sets of positions, within a social space that represents the distribution of, and relationships between, various forms of capital without making reference to reference to relations of production or processes of market exchange. In her ethnography of working-class women in the Midlands, for example, Skeggs (1997) argues that the absence of class identity can itself be a classed process (which is also

“Class, in this context, is conceptualised as a dynamic process which is the site of political struggle, rather than as a set of static and empty positions waiting to be filled by indicators such as employment and housing” (2005, 430). Future reception research might benefit from combining this perspective with critical audience analysis.

Young-Adults and Reality TV

If original series produced by premium cable network are the most celebrated content in the post-network era, then the genre of reality TV “has inherited the rotten reputation that once attached to the medium itself” as shows like MTV's *Jersey Shore* “still provide a fat target for anyone seeking symptoms or causes of American idiocy” (Sanneh 2011). In fact, Newman and Levine (2012) do not address reality TV in their discussions regarding the medium's increasing cultural legitimacy other than to describe the genre as “the most culturally degraded programming of the 2000's” (126). This is understandable since, unlike the “high-minded” focus of documentary cinema (S. Murray 2009, 68), “What ties together all the various formats of the reality TV genre is their professed abilities to more fully provide viewers an unmediated, voyeuristic, and yet often playful look into what might be called the 'entertaining real'” (S.

gendered). The working-class women in her study actively resisted the label “working-class” which they perceived to be highly stigmatized connoting bad taste, poor manners, and host of additional social problems. In contrast, scholars of the second camp including Savage and his co-authors (Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2001; Savage, Warde, and Devine 2005) rely on Bourdieu's notion of field. As Devine and Savage argue, for example, “It is not the case that given economic relations lead to particular kinds of cultural dispositions, but rather that certain modes of cultural deportment may be crucial to the smooth working of 'economic' relationships” (2000, 195). Asserting that “there is no privileged field of social relations where culture is 'found,'” they explain, “What establishes the relationship between class and culture (ie, what establishes the classed nature of cultural dispositions) is not the existence of class consciousness, or the coherence or uniformity of a distinct set of cultural dispositions. Rather, the relationship is to found in the way in which cultural outlooks are implicated in modes of exclusion and/or domination” (Devine and Savage 2000, 195).

Murray and Ouellette 2009, 5).

Furthermore, professional television critics believe reality programming lacks artistic merit. As one critic noted in a recent review of Lifetime's *Bristol Palin: Life's a Tripp*, "The reality show template was pretty much set with MTV's *The Real World*, which put a bunch of hot young people in a house and filmed what happened … All reality shows have followed this format—*Big Brother*, *The Bachelorette*, *The Real Housewives*, *Survivor* ad infinitum" (J. David 2012). Such critical understandings leave little room for the belief that reality TV texts are creative expressions of a showrunner's talent and unique vision. And, unlike professional actors, participants featured on reality TV are not considered artists. Stanley (2007), for example, describes the participants on Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Orange County* as "self-indulgent middle-aged women" performing "a menopausal minstrel show." Critics also assume reality programming is fraudulent. As one notes, "From bait-and-switch marriage proposals to wig-pulling, cocktail-tossing catfights, it's safe to say we've grown accustomed to absurd contrivance and scripting in 'reality' television" (M. Friedman 2012). This falseness, however, extends well beyond the production process since "when the reality stars leave their fake rented house, they need to parade around town maintaining the character they play on the show" (Mihalsky 2010). Even those who enjoy reality TV frequently mention its devalued status; references to vaudeville (Heffernan 2011) and "train wreck" entertainment (Rorke 2005) are common.

In relation to television's increasing cultural legitimacy, this absence of critical support for reality TV has important implications. As Baumann (2007) observes regarding 20th century cinema, while the social processes associated with increasing legitimacy include institutional and

organizational factors such as the development of university film departments and relaxed censorship standards, by using “vocabulary and techniques resembling those used in other highbrow artistic criticism” and approaching Hollywood film as “art rather than entertainment” (159), “critics helped film achieve the status of art” (157). Yet, the significance of critical evaluation, as Bourdieu (1984) argues, is limited by the degree to which the critic and the audience share a “view of the social world” (240). In the context of the “upper-middle culture” associated with high-status professions and “those who have attended the 'better' colleges and universities” (Gans 1999, 106), critics are particularly important because they help differentiate between class-appropriate content and “lower-middle” content thought “too cliched and 'vulgar'” (109). As I have argued elsewhere (Wayne Forthcoming), if post-network reality TV is understood by upper-middle class taste-makers like television critics as distasteful, fake, and socially irresponsible, then the elevated status of any reality text is necessarily related to the ways in which it separates itself from these denigrated norms.

Audience research addressing the reception of reality TV offers little regarding the ways in which attitudes might vary within the middle-class. Sender (2012), for example, uses interviews to examine audiences of four “makeover” reality shows to address the ways in which viewers use reality programs as a resource for constructing a reflexive self. She argues that the reflexivity invoked by makeover programs and embraced by makeover television audiences appears as a new mode for the management of tensions between persisting demands of individual authenticity and escalating exigencies of neoliberalizing institutions. Audiences critique reality television's artifices while this reflexive critical ability simultaneously “reinforce[s] their sense of

the genre's emotional realism” (106) and their investments in it. With regards to class, however, Sender has little to offer directly. After noting that “[m]akeover shows draw from similar class-inflected feeling rules that value expressions of feeling framed within therapeutic discourse” (Sender 2012, 127), she asserts, “Respondents frequently said that having the “right attitude” was a precondition for a successful makeover, as though the elements of this were self-evident. When candidates “had attitude” or had a “bad attitude,” this included talking back to hosts, rolling their eyes at the advice offered, and storming off” (128). Yet, Sender does not connect such understandings of reality TV back to the social location of audience members.

In contrast, Skeggs and Wood (2012) find that among forty South London women of different classes and ethnicities, responses to reality television reflect a process of claiming value. It is through audiences' affective relationships with reality television that attitudes towards the neoliberal ethics and late-modern notions of self-hood emerge most clearly. Skeggs and Wood (2012) find that their middle-class respondents aligned themselves with notions of the self-actualized person-hood. In contrast, working-class viewers were concerned with relationality whereby the uptake of neoliberal labor ideologies was dependent upon the presence of a sufficiently valuable reward. The middle-class group invested in neoliberal work ethics and was able to accrue value temporally, whereas the working-class groups, who were constantly positioned as lacking and unable to accrue value similarly, did not have the same impetus to invest in neoliberal labor mentalities. Rather, they attempted to attach value through 'just getting on with it' and imparting morality on motherhood; as such, Skeggs and Wood (2012) claim that reality television offers morality 'as an episteme divorced from social context, [audiences]

instead decide what matters' (212). In documenting such differing responses to reality television, Skeggs and Wood (2012) identify the ways in which audience reception is entangled with the available representations. Ambiguous responses coexist with more certain readings in a variable fashion as viewers connect and disconnect themselves to and from others and the social conditions with which they are most familiar. As such, viewer reactions are part of an affective economy where there are continual connections and disconnections of the self to and from the social. However, the applicability of these findings to American middle-class audiences remains unclear.

Among the young-adults in this sample, I find middle-class viewers' relationships with reality television reflect many of the same issues that define post-network audience reception in general. Privileged middle-class young-adults perform discursive labor to make reality television acceptable. Claire, for example, believes reality TV is acceptable because particular shows are useful in an educational sense. Discussing reality shows featuring food service industry professionals, she asserts:

> *Top Chef* [Bravo, 2006-] is my absolute favorite, love that show—and actually, that show has—I think that show is educational because I have no idea what it took to be that kind of chef, that level of a chef, and having watched *Hell's Kitchen* [FOX, 2005-] and that show, there's such a difference. *Hell's Kitchen* is like cooks and *Top Chef* is like chefs. I mean, it's people who are like really, really gifted at what they do and I think it's awesome. I think it's important to see how you food—where it comes from and how it's made and to understand that and to like appreciate like an art and it's a gift for people who are that skilled, I mean, it's just awesome. That show is so good. Plus, the drama's fun.

For other respondents, reality TV is acceptable because of its popularity. Discussing *Jersey*

Shore, Brett, a twenty-six year old software engineer, asserts, “It's amazing to me that other people are interested in what they [cast members] are doing.” When asked why he thinks other people are interested, Brett provided a rather ambiguous response saying, “That's a good question, yeah, I don't know. I don't know why people are interested in stuff like that.”

For others, reality TV provides an opportunity to assert their moral and intellectual superiority. this is achieved by explicitly marking themselves as superior to reality TV participants. Wanda, for example, says, “I watch a lot of reality television … I think it’s hilarious…because the people are so pathetic, especially in the VH1 shows. They are the best because it’s these trashy-trashy people looking for love and it’s never going to work out because they’re so trashy and they have no morals. Makes me feel better about myself sometimes.” Of the participants on *Rock of Love* (VH1, 2007-2009) who compete for the affection of an aging, diabetic 80s rock star, she continues, “They just have no morals … they do whatever they want, they don’t think about consequences, they don’t think their grandparents are going to see them on television, or their parents are going to be embarrassed [by seeing participants having] sex with random people, or whatever, passing around God knows what diseases.” She adds, “It’s obviously a lower IQ population, so…it’s funny.” This moral condemnation differs from empirical research addressing English middle-class audiences of reality TV who condemn “working-class uneducated reality TV participants for ‘getting something for nothing’” (Bev Skeggs 2011, 506). For Frank, reality TV genre provides opportunities to laugh “at the rest of the country” and participants. He recalls, “Initially I was laughing at the people on the show. Now I laugh at the people out there who find the show funny … I don't watch it for any kind of

assumption of reality, I just watch it because I think it's funny.” Regarding one particular show premised upon “taking the most arrogant, dishonest, thoughtless and unfaithful boyfriends and transforming them into husband material” (VH1 2009), Frank explains, “And I think it's funny in the sense, like I said, the content itself isn't funny but I view it as like, holy shit there's a show called *Tool Academy* [VH1, 2009-2010] and people watch it and think it's great.” He continues, “It is great. The fact that there is an endless supply of the best character actors in the world in this country alone that are just real people and like that in everyday life, it's just amazing.”

Rather than embracing reality TV, respondents without post-graduate education or a high-status occupation distance themselves from the genre. For Kent, the genre is inseparable from the “boob tube” filled with “all of that crap.” John expresses similar sentiment when discussing what happens when his wife watches reality TV. He claims, “As soon as *Real Housewives* comes on in my house, I'm like fuck this, and I will go grab a book or I will grab the new *Rolling Stone* and just sit there and read it while she is watching TV and I try to block out as much as I can.” In contrast with such distancing strategies, many young women associate reality TV with feelings of guilt and shame. Asked if she regularly watches any reality shows, for example, Kate says she enjoys *Dance Moms* (Lifetime, 2011-). After a moment, she adds, “*America's Next Top Model* [UPN, The CW, 2003-] I am so guilty about. I love that show and I don't know why but I love it and every time I'm watching it when someone walks into the room have to change the channel. It is that embarrassing!” When discussing reality TV, Ruby claims to be disturbed by show featuring “brides competing to get a makeover or a new face or something.” She nonetheless adds, “But I do like the plastic surgery shows.” When asked to clarify which show she had in

mind, Ruth replies, “I think it's like on E! or Bravo. I watch a lot of that crap.” Whether rejecting, distancing themselves from, or shamefully indulging in reality TV, these respondents are implicitly attempting to mark themselves separate from the genre's presumed audience. This finding differs substantially from previous research addressing American viewers of reality TV (Sender 2012).

Discussion:

These findings reflect that post-network era audience reception varies with social status among middle-class viewers. Unlike middle-class audiences' relationship to “quality” television during the multi-channel transition, many of the respondents discussed above have rejected what Gray (2005) calls the “highbrow mythology” (131) that separates bad TV fiction from good non-fiction. These young-adults' reception practices differ substantially from Seiter's (1999) observations that the social rewards associated with television are accessible only for those “who are in a privileged enough position to adopt an interpretation of viewing as active rather than passive” (132) as the factors that distinguish some middle-class audiences from others go far go far beyond the ways in which individual viewers understand their own viewing practices. Furthermore, through discourses that align television with higher-status cultural forms, the medium takes on value as cultural capital in ways that Bourdieu (1997) did not anticipate.[30]

In the context of television's “third golden age,” this chapter reveals the uneven results of cultural legitimation. While at one point it may have been accurate to claim, as Newman and

30 Bourdieu's most extensive engagement with television occurs in the appropriately titled book *On Television* (1997). It is an extended denunciation of the medium focused almost exclusively on television news and its failure to adequately support democracy.

Levine (2012) do, that the primary agents of television's increasing status were "cultural elites (including journalists, popular critics, TV creators and executives, and media scholars)" (7), it is no longer appropriate to leave audiences out of the equation. Yet, from the perspective of critical audience analysis, "the structure of access" (Morley 1992, 118) to the discourses associated with television's increasing legitimacy vary with social location. Greater access to discourses of cultural legitimacy allow privileged middle-class young-adults the opportunity to embrace television. In taking advantage of such access, even reality TV, the most "culturally degraded" (Newman and Levine 2012, 126) post-network content, becomes acceptable for middle-class audiences. Without access to such discourses, it is less secure middle-class audiences who continue to maintain the distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate forms of middle-class leisure.

These findings indicate a degree of similarity between television at the beginning of the post-network era and other forms of American popular culture that were thoroughly devalued at moments in their histories before becoming legitimated. Hollywood film, once considered "cheap shows for cheap people" (Hampton 1970, 61), became "a high status cultural cue" as a result of cinema's association with art during the 1960s (Baumann 2007, 171). Similarly, the emergence of a "legitimate" American theater was only possible in opposition to working-class cultural forms the like vaudeville and cinema (Savran 2009). In this light, audience reception of post-network television provides a window into the broader social processes through which objects and knowledge become cultural capital when individuals employ specific practices and discursive resources.

Yet, in the case of theater and other arts that became highbrow, the social processes of legitimation were lead by social elites and reduced access to newly legitimated culture. Discussing theater in America, for example, Levine (1988) argues that the separation of highbrow from lowbrow was achieved by an elite under pressure from urbanization and immigration to articulate a new basis of legitimation for its prestige and social dominance. By the end of the 19th century, the previously commonplace practice of performing Shakespeare along with a farce, a comic dance, and a trained animal act had disappeared, the rowdy audience behavior in public performances had been eliminated (no more crunching peanuts during a concert or hissing inept actors), and newcomers were convinced to value, if not share, the aesthetic tastes of the elite. Similarly, Dimaggio (1992) argues that theater, dance, and opera became forms of cultural capital by symbolically and organizationally piggybacking on already legitimated culture. With particular reference to Boston, DiMaggio argues that the creation of institutional high culture necessitated "entrepreneurship, classification and framing" (1991, 377).[31] Returning to the post-network era, it seems television has no institutional equivalents and there is no concerted effort on the part of social elites to change anyone's aesthetic tastes.

Perhaps more significantly, television's rising status is occurring at a time of increasing access to cultural of all kinds. Whereas high culture was once surrounded by structural barriers like the cost of a ticket to the opera and cultural barriers like limited access to the knowledge

31 Entrepreneurship refers to the creation of an organizational form that members of the elite could control and govern. Classification refers to the erection of strong and clearly defined boundaries between art and entertainment, the definition of a high art that elites and segments of the middle class could appropriate as their own cultural property; and the acknowledgment of that classification's legitimacy by other classes and the state. And framing refers to the development of a new etiquette of appropriation, a new relationship between the audience and the work of art.

needed to appreciate post-modern art (Halle 1993), digital technology including the expansion of broadband internet access reduces the difficulty of traversing such barriers (although it has not eliminated them). In this cultural context, the mark of privilege is not access or knowledge as both are more readily available than perhaps they have ever been. Rather, as Khan (2012) notes in his analysis of contemporary elite culture, privilege is reflected in the ability "to move with ease through the broad range of culture, to move with felicity from the elite to the popular" (161). By embracing post-network television, privileged middle-class young-adults embrace the ethos that one should engage with all aspects of culture. Both the highbrow and lowbrow are worthy of serious engagement. The distance non-privileged middle-class young-adults maintain with television lacks the ease of privilege.

Conclusion:

The significance of the findings in this chapter are limited by the changes that define the post-network television landscape. As recently as 1977, three broadcast networks accounted for over 90% of all the prime-time television watched by Americans (Veronis, Suhler & Associates 1994). By 2013, the average American home was receiving 189 channels (Nielsen 2014). The availability of content is so vast that it is difficult to see how audiences navigate TV's emerging hierarchies through unfocused discussions of the medium. After detailing the contours of one specific post-network status hierarchy in chapter three, in chapter four, I use qualitative interviews with viewers of prime-time cable crime dramas to highlight the ways in which middle-class audiences respond to television's elevated status at the level of genre and text.

In addition, the analysis of middle-class young-adults and reality TV is limited by the relatively unfocused nature of the interviews which form the data in this chapter. It is inappropriate to assume all reality TV are considered low-status in the context of the post-network television. Similarly, it is inappropriate to assume that status is constant among the shows within the genre. In fact, there are high-status reality TV shows (Wayne Forthcoming) as the cable network A&E has produced some of the most celebrated shows in the genre. According to the trade publication *Advertising Age* (2012a), A&E is "the premiere destination for unscripted programs that are authentic and relatable." In describing A&E, a New York Times critic writes, "From *Intervention* and *The First 48* to *Beyond Scared Straight* and *Heavy*, these are well made, compulsively watchable series" (Hale 2011). As an extension of their reliance upon problematic hierarchies that equate classed notions of reflexivity with moral worth, the relative legitimacy of shows like *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* depends upon their ability to extract middle-class-appropriate behavior from socially marginal participants. Yet, as a consequence of asking respondents about reality TV in general terms, the data in this chapter cannot speak to the ways in which reception of such programs may or may not vary within middle-class audiences. By considering the status of cable crime dramas in relation to audience reception practices, chapter four seeks to address such issues.

CHAPTER III

POST-NETWORK STATUS HIERARCHIES: CULTURALLY LEGITIMATED, HIGH STATUS, AND LOW STATUS CABLE CRIME DRAMA

Introduction:

This chapter proposes a status hierarchy of post-network cable crime dramas. I begin with a brief discussion of crime drama as a genre and then describe several features that distinguish post-network crime drama from its predecessors including the protagonist's occupation, the emergence of the morally ambiguous "anti-hero," and serialized (rather than episodic) narratives. In the following section, I address the relationship between crime drama and the brand identity of cable networks as such relationships were not possible during the network era. Next, I discuss two useful indicators of prestige among cable crime dramas and highlight the ways in which they are related to the economic contexts of post-network cable television. On the basis of these indicators, in the following section, I describe the status hierarchy associated with prime-time cable crime drama and construct a typology consisting of three categories: culturally legitimated shows, high status shows, and low status shows. The remainder of the chapter addresses the process by which five premium (subscriber supported) cable shows and five basic (advertiser supported) cable shows[32] were chosen as the focus of audience engagement which will be

32 The premium cable shows are *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014), *Dexter* (SHO, 2006–2013), and *Homeland* (SHO, 2011-present). The basic cable are *Burn Notice* (USA, 2009-present), *The Closer* (TNT, 2005-2012), *Sons of*

addressed in the subsequent chapter. This chapter concludes with a brief summary of post-network status hierarchies.

Crime Drama as Genre:

According to Mittell, "television genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts" (2004, xii). In this sense, crime drama is distinguished from legal and medical drama in ways that go beyond the occupation of the protagonist. Nonetheless, during much of television's history, the crime drama and the police drama or the "cop show" were largely synonymous. Although NBC's *Dragnet* (1951-1959, 1967-1970) began as a radio program, its depictions of the police officer as a public hero came to define the police procedural. As Mittell (2004) notes, "One of the representational strategies that *Dragnet* uses to solidify this worldview is the use of overt binary oppositions, such as law versus crime, order versus chaos, and efficient system versus rogue individualism" (146). Such binaries were consistent with other elements of 1950s culture that served national myths about stability and American contentment. Definitive moral conclusions are particularly important because they encourage the ideological belief that large-scale social problems can be meaningfully addressed at the individual, rather than the systemic level (Gitlin 1987). In many ways, it was this sense of moral certainty and ideological fealty to the status quo that came to define crime drama throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Lane 2001). Shows fitting this mold include: *Ironside* (NBC, 1967-75), *Mod Squad* (ABC, 1968-73), *Hawaii Five-0* (CBS, 1968-80), *Kojak* (CBS, 1973-78),

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Anarchy (FX, 2008-2014), *Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010-), and *White Collar* (USA, 2007-2013).

Starsky and Hutch (ABC, 1975-79), and *Baretta* (ABC, 1975-78).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the narrative focus of crime drama shifted from catching criminals to the daily lives of "ordinary" cops. If *Dragnet* was the defining crime drama of the 1950s, 1960, 1970s, then *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987) performed a similar role in the 1980s. As Lane describes, "On one level, *Hill Street Blues* was about the problems encountered by its 'ordinary cops' in dealing with crime in an inner-city precinct. On another and more significant level, it was about the personal lives of the officers in their relationships with each other" (2001, 139). In moving away from the morally dichotomous model of the earlier police drama, *Hill Street Blues* acquired a degree of cultural legitimacy that had largely been denied television, in general, and crime dramas, in particular. As one of the shows that ushered in what he calls the "second golden age," Thompson (1997) claims the show "brought something truly different to prime-time television" (60). Indeed, *Hill Street Blues* was denser and less viewer-friendly than most network era dramas. Specifically, the combination of character-driven drama and serialized narratives allowed for shifting relationships and character development over a long period of time. Despite receiving low ratings, the show performed well with the most affluent audience demographics. In addition, its first season earned twenty-one Emmy nominations and went on to win eight Emmy awards.[33]

When discussing this narrative shift in generic terms, however, Nichols-Pethick argues that the key to understanding the style of police dramas during the multi-channel transition is the increasing reliance on hybridity defined as "the mixing of two or more generic types in order to

33 This success was only surpassed by *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006) which won nine Emmy awards for its first season.

create a seemingly new, differentiated text" (2012, 35). In the case of *Hill Street Blues*, many critics labeled the show a mixture of the police drama and the soap opera as a result of the show's reliance on character-driven melodrama and serialized narrative structure. More recent shows that rely on this narrative template include *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005) and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999).

Although protagonists in these shows are depicted as complex in relation to earlier dramas, police officers remain the legitimate arbiters of moral authority with personal shortcomings thrown in for texture. In *NYPD Blue*, the protagonist, Detective Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz), begins the series as a racist, sexist, alcoholic who perjures himself in open court. Yet, the remainder of the series can largely be understood as a tale of his redemption following a series of tragedies including the deaths of his first wife, his oldest son, and two partners (one killed by cancer, another by the mafia). During the show's twelfth and final season, Sipowicz is promoted to the rank of sergeant. On the way to the promotion ceremony, wearing dress blues, the character is given a standing ovation by his coworkers as he walks through the station-house. Furthermore, in the series finale, Sipowicz takes over as squad commander. In contrast with ratings giant *NYPD Blue*, *Homicide* is less dependent upon a single protagonist. Rather, the narrative shifts its focus between several important characters who change over the course of the series' six seasons. Nonetheless, like its highly-rated peer, the show provides "the 'missing link' between the quality dramas of the 1980s … and groundbreaking cable series unencumbered by network limitations" (Higgins 2013, 13).

Post-Network Crime Drama:

If network shows like *NYPD Blue* and *Homicide* continued the trend towards more complex crime drama that began with *Hill Street Blues*, then contemporary network crime drama reflects a reversal. Shows like *NCIS* (CBS, 2003-) and *CSI* (CBS, 2000-) indicate that "police series on broadcast networks have largely embraced a mode of storytelling that might be called 'high-concept' television: based on simplified and episodic storylines, distinct visual styles, and the potential for expanding franchises" (Nichols-Pethick 2012, 153). Yet, like Gitlin's (1987) arguments regarding network era television more broadly, contemporary scholars understand prime-time network crime dramas in ideological terms. As Hohenstein (2009) argues regarding *CSI*, for example, the "scientific examination of facts leads to clear and concise conclusions" which "offer easy answers to complicated conflicts" in the criminal justice system (67). In spite of declining ratings (Adalian and Woocher 2014; Stelter 2013a), network crime dramas are still produced with the intent of building "coalition" audiences composed of viewers from a variety of demographic groups to maximize ratings. As I have argued (Wayne 2014), although contemporary network crime dramas include highbrow textual features that are largely associated with culturally legitimated cable crime dramas, they are nonetheless intended to appeal to middlebrow sensibilities.

In contrast, cable crime dramas are intended for "narrowcast," not broadcast audiences (Gillan 2011). Rather than attempting to gain the attention of large audiences, the economic model of advertiser-supported cable networks allows them to profitably produce shows that will only be viewed by one percent of the available audience (Lotz 2007, 37). Like many of the

changes television underwent during the multi-channel transition, the genre of contemporary crime drama has its roots in the recent past but only flowered during the post-network era. As the consequence of the industry level changes discussed in previous chapters, cable crime dramas differ from their generic predecessors in three significant ways.

First, protagonists in cable crime dramas are no longer exclusively agents of the state or psuedo-agents like private detectives.[34] In *The Sopranos*, for example, Tony begins the series as a *caporegime* ("capo"), a high ranking member of the mafia who runs a crew of "soldiers," in a fictional Northern New Jersey mob family. Although Tony struggles with panic attacks, a troubled marriage, two spoiled children, and an elderly parent no longer capable of living alone, he is nonetheless a criminal and a sociopath. In the first season episode "College" (S01E05), for example, after dropping off his daughter for an interview at Colby College, Tony ambushes and murders a mobster-turned-government informant by strangling him with an extension cord.[35] Similarly, *Sons of Anarchy* follows an all-white outlaw motorcycle club (MC) fashioned after the infamous Hells Angels and representative of the most hardcore "one-percenter" subset of biker MCs.[36] Like the rules governing the behavior of Italian-American mafiosi in *The Sopranos* (Licata 2011; Villez 2011), the members of Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club Redwood Original

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34 Examples of the former include *Cagney & Lacey* (CBS, 1982-88) and *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984-89). Examples of the latter include *Charlie's Angels* (ABC, 1976-81) and *Magnum, P.I.* (CBS, 1980-88).

35 This scene created some conflict between HBO executives and showrunner David Chase. HBO executive Chris Albrecht believed audiences would not be willing to watch a TV show in which the protagonist was a cold-blooded murderer. He recalls, "I said, 'David, you can't do this. He can't kill this guy. You haven't earned it yet. The audience is going to hate him. It's the fifth episode. Wait until the end of the season.' And David said to me, 'If Tony Soprano were to find this guy and doesn't kill him, he is full of shit, and therefore the show is full of shit.' And I said, 'Okay, that's a good point'" (Sepinwall 2012, 41).

36 Following the 1947 Hollister riots, the American Motorcycle Association was alleged to have announced that ninety-nine percent of motorcyclists are honorable, law-abiding citizens, and that it is one percent of riders who give motorcyclists a bad name (Wolf 1991).

chapter (SAMCRO) are bound to an alternative (non-judicial) system of rules based on loyalty, respect, and “brotherhood” (Mahon 2013). AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) depicts Walter White's transformation from meek high school chemistry teacher to ruthless drug kingpin and criminal mastermind. In Cinemax's *Banshee* (2013-). the series' unnamed protagonist is a career criminal. Released from prison after fifteen years, he assumes the identity of Lucas Hood, a small town sheriff who was murdered by local thugs. Other shows with criminal protagonists include *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014), *Dexter* (SHO, 2006–2013) and *The Americans* (FX, 2013-). Yet, the emergence of the criminal protagonist in some cable crime dramas does not imply a dearth of traditional lead characters. Such characters can be found in shows like *Longmire* (A&E, 2012-2014), *The Glades* (A&E, 2010-2013), *Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010-), TNT's *The Closer* (2005-2012) and its spin-off *Major Crimes* (2012).

Second, cable crime dramas are often “anti-heroic” narratives. Since the debut of *The Sopranos*, original hour-long dramas with narratives centered on morally ambiguous, white, male protagonists have become increasingly common on US cable television. Among critics, discussions of television’s contemporary “golden age" are seemingly inseparable from discussions of the “anti-hero” (Paskin 2013; Van Der Werff 2013), a character who serves as the audience’s “primary point of ongoing narrative alignment, but whose behavior and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance” (Mittell 2013, chap. Character). Although the term “anti-hero” is an increasingly common descriptor of protagonists in contemporary prime-time cable drama, there is no clear definition or universal theoretical description of an anti-hero (Shafer and Raney 2012). Typically, the term refers to the central

distinction between traditional heroes who lack moral flaws and anti-heroes whose moral flaws are directly related to the unfolding dramatic narrative. Narratives driven by anti-heroes frequently rely upon the use of "relative morality" whereby the ethically questionable behavior of the protagonist is "juxtaposed with more explicitly villainous and unsympathetic characters" (Mittell 2013, chap. Character). Furthermore, many post-network anti-hero protagonists bear significant similarities to traditional "American villain-types" such as the "desperado or outlaw," the "authoritarian," the "flouter," and the "claimant of undue privilege" (Klapp 1956).

Third, in contrast to the episodic narrative structure associated with network era drama, post-network cable crime dramas frequently feature serialized narratives. In his widely cited analysis of post-network narrative structure, Mittell argues that "narrative complexity" has emerged "as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception" (2006, 29). "At its most basic level," Mittell explains, "narrative complexity is a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration … Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres" (2006, 32). The long-form storytelling and serialized narratives of original premium cable series, are seen as more engaging, addressing a committed and passionate viewer in relation to episodic narratives of network procedural dramas. With protagonists who are not agents of the state and anti-heroic narratives delivered in serialized installments, post-network cable crime drama rejects the norms of the network era including the typical hero who must "confront forces that are convincingly wicked" (256) in the context of episodic narratives with happy endings that allow "the

irreconcilable to be reconciled" (Gitlin 1987, 260). In addition to differing from network era crime dramas at the level of the text, cable crime dramas also differ in terms of their relationships to the network which produces them.

Prime-time Drama and the Brand Identities of Cable Networks:

Cable crime dramas are often linked to the brand identity of the network in ways that were impossible prior to the post-network era. For example, one scholar notes, "*The Sopranos* is HBO, at its best: the culmination of a mythic, monolithic master narrative about a network that rose from the obscurity of a small Pennsylvania cable system in 1972 to become one of the most valuable and influential networks in the history of television" (DeFino 2014, 19–20). Home Box Office (HBO), which began broadcasting in 1972 as a subsidiary of New York City's Sterling Manhattan Cable which was itself partially owned by Time, Inc. (Mullen 2008, 108), initially distinguished itself from other cable networks with uncensored movies and sports programming. By the late 1990's, however, the network had become "the TV equivalent of a designer label" (Edgerton 2008, 9). Indeed, as Anderson notes, "Since the premiere of *The Sopranos* in 1999, HBO has invited viewers to approach American television series with a peculiar sensibility" defined by "the cultivated expectation that watching certain television series requires and rewards the temperament, knowledge, and protocols normally considered appropriate for encounters with museum worthy works of art" (2008, 4).

Both the expectations of viewers and the network's brand image are frequently associated with the 1996 introduction of the marketing slogan "It's Not TV." Yet, as a host of scholars have

noted, HBO's marketing strategy relies upon the long-standing marginalization of television and its audiences (Santo 2008; Feuer 2007; McCabe and Akass 2007; Leverette, Ott, and Buckley 2008; Edgerton and Jones 2009). Regarding television as a cultural form, Newcomb (2006) observes, “HBO's slogan is, in effect, dependent on a set of assumptions about the medium that no longer hold, a retro activation – and implicit denigration – of older general meanings and attitudes” (574). In reference to television's frequently maligned audience, McCabe and Akass (2008) note that HBO draws “much capital from cultural snobbery around television as it sets out to appeal to the college-educated audience who supposedly do not watch TV” (85). Research addressing non-viewers, however, does not find snobbery to be a significant motivation. Rather, non-viewers are motivated by religious beliefs or concerns regarding the role of television in family life (Krcmar 2008).[37]

The first advertiser-supported cable network to successfully mimic HBO's branding strategy was FX. In contrast with NBC's “must-see TV” strategy which created the expectation of a particular kind of television experience, contemporary branding efforts allows networks to charge more for advertisements and product placements based on the series attracting the right demographics. Perjoratively known as “Fox on cable” (Larson 2003), FX reinvented its brand with the complex, hyper-masculine anti-hero drama *The Shield* (2002–2008) establishing itself as

37 According to Portwood-Stacer (2012), “conspicuous non-consumption” is a form of media refusal. Although her research addresses Facebook non-users, this idea resembles the understanding of rejecting television “as a symbol of resistance to commercialism, passivity, and moral corruption” (1046) found in Krcmar (2008). Portwood-Stacer notes, “refusers make their refuser status visible through performances of non-consumption which are also on display.” She continues, “In a media-saturated consumer society, it is quite meaningful to be a person who says no to media consumption, thus it is significant when people publicize their abstention practices through website testimonials, social media updates, t-shirt slogans, and everyday spoken and written utterances about quitting or holding out” (1047).

one of cable's premiere destinations for "gritty" (Owen 2003), "risky" (Lafayette 2008), and "edgy" (Hampp 2007) fare. Set in the fictional Farmington district of contemporary Los Angeles, the show centers its narrative on a corrupt police detective, Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis), who murders another police officer at the conclusion of the pilot episode. The premiere of *The Shield* drew 4.8 million viewers and was, at the time, the highest rated scripted show in the history of basic cable (Sepinwall 2012, 142). In addition, Michael Chiklis received the 2002 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series for his portrayal of Vic Mackey.

In the wake of *The Shield*'s unprecedented success, the advertiser-supported network introduced a slew of prime-time dramas including *Nip/Tuck* (2003–2010) and *Rescue Me* (2004–2011) to build "a roster of series aimed at its young, male demographic […] that bear more resemblance to each other as 'FX series' than they do to other examples of their various genres" (Nichols-Pethick 2012, 162). Although the network claims its diverse line-up of dramas are united by "emotionally complex and authentically human characters" (FX Networks 2007), as one critic observes, "Series on FX have balls" (Goodman 2010). Indeed, by 2012, FX was the second highest rated cable network among men between 18 and 49 (Ad Age 2012b).

FX, a subsidiary of the Fox television network, launched in 1994 as a showcase for 20th Century Television-owned classic programming like *Batman* (1966–1968). By the late 1990s, the network's lineup included a combination of movies and reruns of Fox series including *Married with Children* (1987–1997). FX's first attempt to attract the highly valuable male 18–49 demographic was the acquisition of NASCAR racing in 1999. This was followed by the introduction of the network's first original series, *Son of a Beach* (2000–2002), a comedic parody

of *Baywatch* (1989–1999) with radio personality Howard Stern attached as an executive producer. Although FX succeeded in attracting a niche audience of men, it still lacked a cohesivel brand identity. In this context, *The Shield* "presented itself as the appropriate vehicle for a niche network looking to distinguish itself in the crowded media marketplace" (Nichols-Pethick 2012, 162). Like the subscription-based cable network HBO appeals to niche rather than mass audiences, *The Shield* "exhibited a certain amount of 'edge,' meaning it clearly defined the boundaries of its intended audiences and deliberately excluded some tastes and sensibilities" (Lotz 2007, 185).[38] Yet, rather than ask its audience to empathize with a character who was traditionally the villain as HBO had done with *The Sopranos*, FX and *The Shield* "took a classically sympathetic figure and made him into someone you could view as a hero, a monster,

38 The particular appeal of hyper-masculine FX dramas with violent overtones are the often linked to the growing sense of "white masculinity in crisis." The treatment of homophobia in *Rescue Me*, for example, depicts working-class white men "negotiating adjustments in dominant ideology regarding gay identity" from the perspective of "those whose past privilege is under siege and whose world-views are rendered increasingly obsolete" (Draper and Lotz 2012, 254). Similarly, for both the doctors and male patients in *Nip/Tuck*, plastic surgery is "an attempt at making their masculinity 'whole' again" (Brandt 2011, 20). Although the notion of masculinity-in-crisis has historical precedents (2005), the current crisis is associated with a variety of factors that challenge the validity of male privilege including neo-liberal economic policies, consumerism and, most notably, feminism, along with a range of related movements (civil rights, gay rights, antiwar) (Robinson 2000). Among television scholars, the ideological significance of post-network texts speaking to this sense of declining privilege remains the subject of debate. According to Mittell (2013), for example, in "complex masculinist dramas" like *The Shield*, *Rescue Me*, *Sons of Anarchy* and *Justified*, "the narrative act of making male privilege an object of dramatic conflict, as well as encouraging male viewers to experience the emotional realm of effeminate melodramatic pleasure, can be regarded as progressive steps within the traditionally hegemonic realm of dramatic television" ("Serial Melodrama"). In contrast, Harris proposes the category of "postmasculinist" television drama defined by an "ambiguous/ambivalent relation not just towards feminism but to other twentieth-century movements that were concerned with the de-centring and de-naturalization of the normative, white masculine subject" (2012, 443). Like post-feminist media culture, the use of retro imagery in *Deadwood* or nostalgia in *The Sopranos*, for example, is significant because the act of referencing a previous era suggests that problematic social attitudes like sexism and racism have been left in the past (Gill 2007). From this perspective, the white, male anti-hero protagonist's experience of existential crisis "may be as much, indeed more, a sign of the recuperation and reaffirmation of 'hegemonic masculinity' as of its undoing" (G. Harris 2012, 444).

or something in between" (Sepinwall 2012, 143). Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the importance of *The Shield* when considering the recent history of FX. According to network president John Landgraf, "If we had a building and there was a cornerstone, it would read '*The Shield*: March 2002,'" adding, "That's really when FX as we know it began" (Lafayette 2008). Furthermore, in the five years following the show's debut, the network's ratings nearly doubled (Becker 2007). In addition to its importance for the network it helped make famous, *The Shield* occupies an important place in recent television history demonstrating that advertiser-supported cable networks could, in fact, produce high status prime-time drama.

AMC, however, remains the advertiser-supported network most closely linked with television's increasing cultural legitimacy (Jaramillo 2012). As one critic notes, FX 'never quite crossed over into the sweet, sweet realm of capital-R Respect' and the network's new dramas like *The Americans* (2013-) and an adaptation of the Danish drama *The Bridge* (2013-) reflect an ongoing effort to establish "a higher level of 'prestige' while still keeping a toe or two in the butch-ish, crime 'n' grime milieu that made them" (Lawson 2013). Like HBO, AMC has produced two culturally legitimated prime-time cable dramas: *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. As the winner of four consecutive Primetime Emmy awards for Outstanding Drama Series between 2008 and 2011, *Mad Men* is the post-network era's most culturally legitimated non-crime drama. As was mentioned above, *Breaking Bad* is widely considered among the best television shows of all time (St. John 2013; Klosterman 2011). However, there is little reason to believe AMC will continue generating anything resembling the prestige associated with *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*. As Jaramillo (2012) notes, the introduction of "its mass-appeal zombie series *The Walking*

Dead, [2010-] its more niche, female-led murder mystery *The Killing* [2011-2013], its 1860s drama *Hell on Wheels* [2011-], and its fanboy foray into reality TV *Comic Book Men* [2012-]" indicate that the network's "brand—communicated most loudly by the tagline—became less focused. AMC's 2011 tagline, 'Story Matters Here,' prompts us to ask if the network has simply given up on branding itself in a meaningful way" (179). In addition, for all of the critical acclaim directed at *Mad Men*, the show is not particularly popular. The show's fifth season two-hour premiere, for example, was watched by 3.5 million viewers (Steinberg 2012); that same week, a rerun of *NCIS* on basic cable network USA drew 3.9 million viewers. Yet, the show's small audience is the TV's wealthiest (not including viewers of premium cable). Fifty-four percent of adult viewers (25-54) who watched *Mad Men*'s seventh season premiere have incomes that exceed $100,000 per year (O'Connell 2014). By and large, the show functions as a loss leader for AMC (Smith 2013) earning critical and industry acclaim while more popular shows like *The Walking Dead* generate significantly more advertising revenue. As a consequence of these programming decisions, it seems that in the near future HBO will continue to dominated critical discussions of the "best" shows in television history, as it has since the beginning of the post-network era (Traister and Miller 2007; Zoller Seitz 2012).

Constructing a Status Hierarchy for Cable Crime Drama:

The most useful status indicators for contemporary American television are critical evaluation and industry awards. According to Bourdieu, critics act as "cultural intermediaries" (1984, 325). As part of a broader category, the term refers to those sets of occupations and

workers involved in the production and circulation of symbolic goods and services in the context of an expanding cultural economy in postwar Western societies. Specifically, critics writing for high status publications help create broader social views of what constitutes good or bad television. In addition, their approach to evaluating television frequently reflects the dominant cultural hierarchy and its views on mass and popular culture. Although there is a hierarchy of critics and criticism, as an occupational group, television critics can be understood as members of an increasingly college-educated middle-class.

Given the significance of professional critics, "metascores" from Metacritic.com are a useful proxy for cultural status. Metacritic is a website that collects and aggregates reviews of television shows, movies, and video games. Ranging from zero to one hundred, a "metascore" is a weighted average of reviews from top critics and publications. As the site's editors explain, "When selecting our source publications, we noticed that some critics consistently write better (more detailed, more insightful, more articulate) reviews than others. In addition, some critics and/or publications typically have more prestige and weight in the industry than others" (Metacritic 2014a). The site assigns a "universal acclaim" mark to scores 81-100; "generally favorable" to scores between 61-80; "mixed or average" to those ranked 40-60; "generally unfavorable" to 20-39; and finally "overwhelming dislike" to shows scored between 0-19 (Metacritic 2014b). The site further elaborates, "Creating our proprietary Metascores is a complicated process. We carefully curate a large group of the world's most respected critics, assign scores to their reviews, and apply a weighted average to summarize the range of their opinions" (Metacritic 2014b). As a result, the site claims that the metascore is "a single number

Chart 3.1:

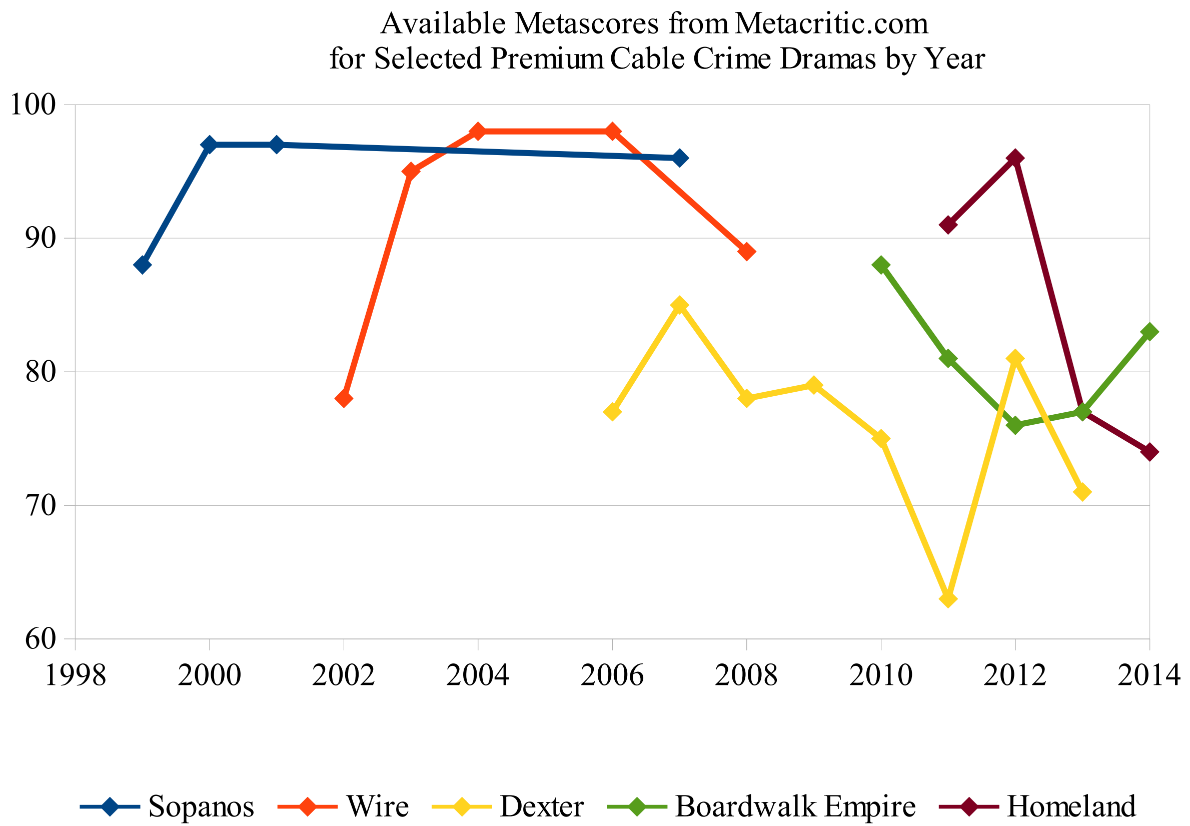
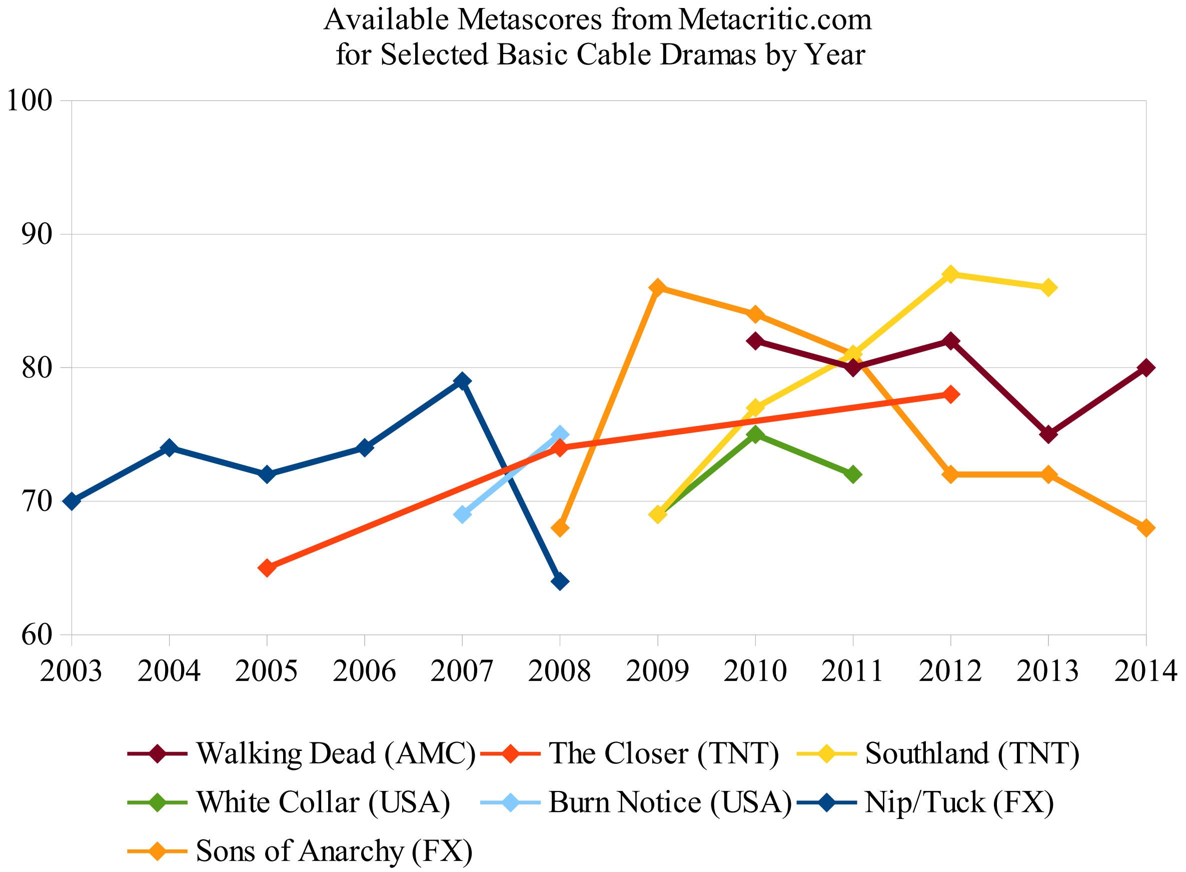


Chart 3.2:



that captures the essence of critical opinion." At least four reviews are needed to calculate a metascore. However, the exact weight given to particular critics and publications is unknown. In fact, the only details regarding the construction of metascore aggregates comes from journalists and game studies scholars concerned with rankings as related to video games. According to one study, the weights assigned to reviews may not accurately represent the general consensus of reviewers, weights are assigned at the discretion of Metacritic and criteria for weighting are not transparent, and, as a result, a single highly divergent score from a highly-weighted publication can distort the overall metascore (Greenwood-Ericksen, Poorman, and Papp 2013). Nonetheless, for contemporary television, metascores largely align with other status indicators.

In addition to critical evaluation, industry awards are a useful tool for determining the contours of particular cultural hierarchies. Generally, the prize facilitates "cultural 'market transactions,' enabling the various individual and institutional agents of culture, with their different assets and interests and dispositions, to engage one another in a collective project of value production" (English 2009, 26). Although there are several types of television industry awards, the most significant are the Emmy Awards given by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Members of the Academy work in the television industry and are the only voters for the Emmy Awards. As one scholar-critic notes, the significance of the Emmys is related to the way in which "their legitimacy is visible throughout the process, as submissions are made, ballots are distributed, and then nominees are chosen to in some cases submit to extensive, relatively transparent processes through which winners are selected" (McNutt 2012).

Furthermore, among cable networks, Emmy Awards are fiercely contested. For example,

Chart 3.3:

Number of Prime-Time Emmy Nominations/Wins
for Selected Premium Cable Crime Dramas

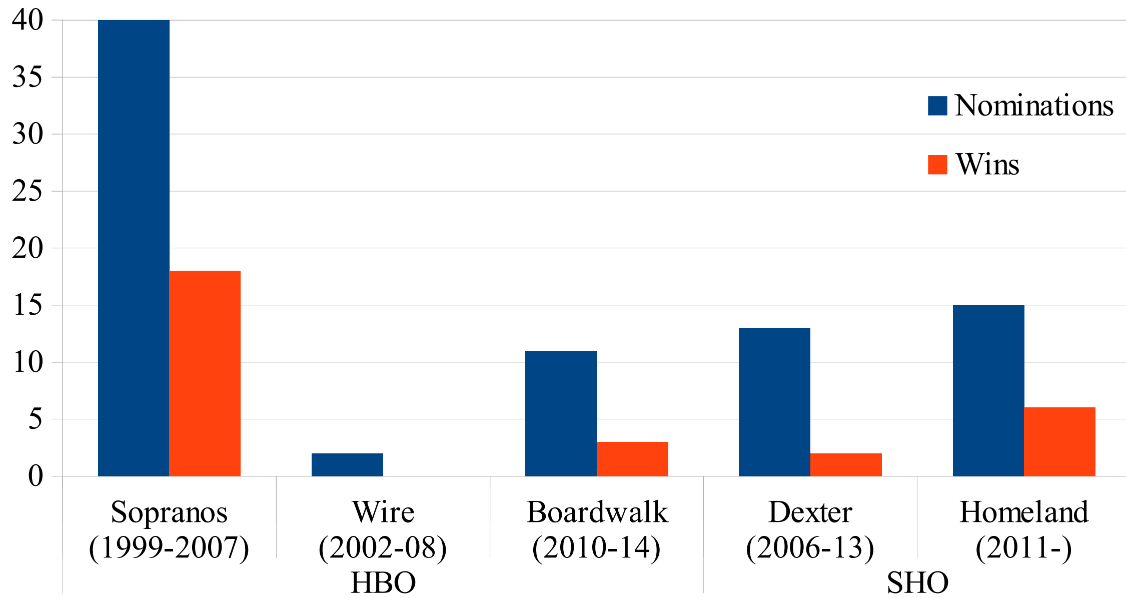
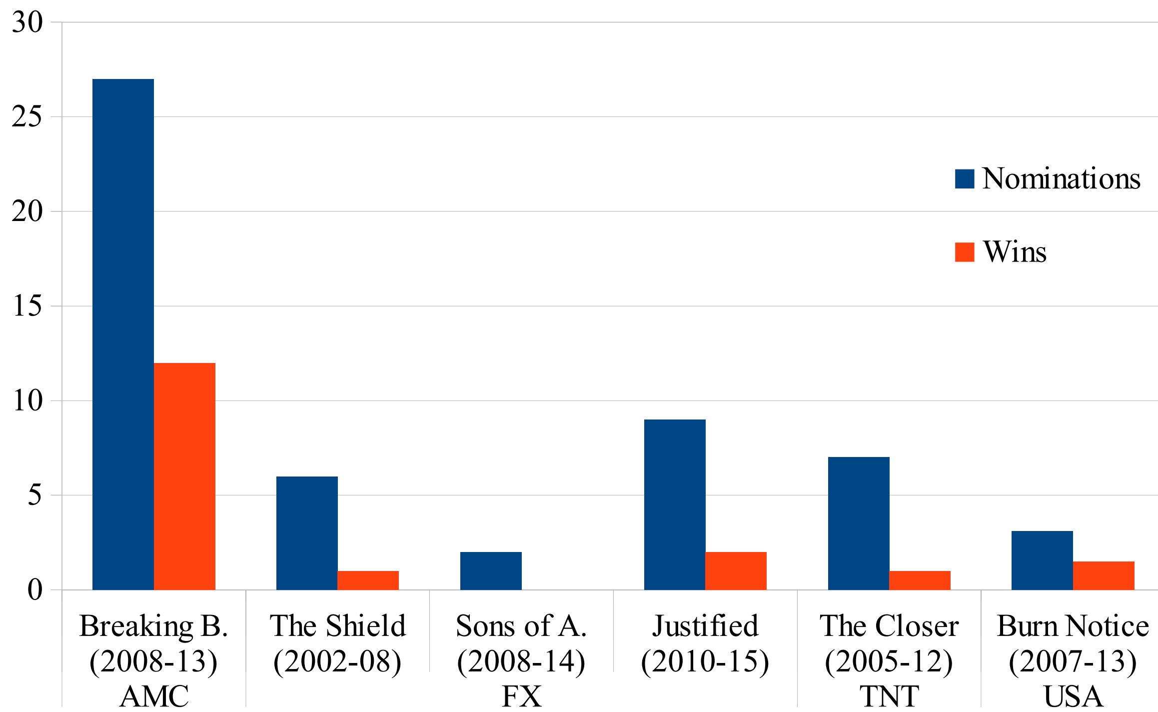


Chart 3.4:

Number of Prime-Time Emmy Nominations/Wins
for Selected Basic Cable Crime Dramas



FX's Landgraf described HBO's choice to submit *True Detective* as a drama rather than a miniseries as “unfair” (Andreeva 2014). Specifically, Landgraf takes issue with the commitment required by actors involved with miniseries, “It doesn’t make sense to put actors who signed on to do one year and perform the beginning, middle, and end of a character against those who are only showing one-fifth or one-sixth of that character’s journey in a season.” Comparing HBO's anthology series with his own network's cold-war spy drama *The Americans*, he elaborates, [*True Detective* co-star] Matthew McConaughey is doing work every bit as good as [*Americans* male lead] Matthew Rhys, but he’ll be competing against like one-sixth of the other actor’s performance.” He continues, “It doesn’t strike me as particularly fair. And I can see the entire series category eventually stacked with movie actors who signed on for one series of a show.” Although the 2014 Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series ultimately was given to Bryan Cranston for his work as *Breaking Bad* protagonist Walter White, Landgraf's public complaints nonetheless point to the significance of these industry awards in networks struggles for prestige.

Of course, industry awards do not perfectly map on to status hierarchies. Among cable crime dramas, this fact is most apparent in the limited number of nominations and the absence of awards for *The Wire*. In his unpublished dissertation, Sodano (2008) uses material from critical reviews and interviews with professional television critics to offer several explanations as to why the academy failed to recognize what it widely considered to be one of the greatest television shows of all-time. Sodano note that the explosion of scripted content in the post-network era has put a strain on Emmy votes as many do not have time to watch all the submission in full. He also

notes that the Emmys are often a popularity contest. He writes, “Excellence is not judged; rather, what earns the most press is” (Sodano 2008, 285). In addition, the Emmy nomination process requires that particular episodes be submitted. Indeed, as well known critic Maureen Ryan (2007) notes, “For many of TV's best shows, viewing an entire season is a must. But that's rarely how Emmy voters see those shows.” As a consequence of having a serialized narrative structure, *The Wire* is obviously disadvantaged during the Emmy nomination and voting process which rely exclusively upon single episodes.

Nonetheless, considering critical evaluation as represented by Metacritic scores and industry awards as represented by the Primetime Emmy awards,[39] it is clear that issues related to post-network economics have some relationship to the cultural status hierarchy of cable drama. As the charts on the following pages reflect, premium cable dramas receive more Emmy nominations for which they win more awards that basic cable dramas. In addition, premium cable dramas are viewed more favorable by television critics. It seems that prestige is related to increased distance from network era norms. With these distinctions in mind, in the next section I present a status hierarchy for prime-time cable crime drama.

The Status Hierarchy of Post-Network Crime Dramas:

Considering critical evaluation as represented by Metascores, industry awards, and the battle for prestige among networks, it is reasonable to conceptualize the cultural hierarchy of post-network cable crime drama in terms of three categories: culturally legitimated shows, high status shows, and low status shows. It would be inappropriate to consider this typology to be a

39 The Creative Arts Emmy awards are not considered here.

complete survey of all post-network crime dramas. Most notably, foreign crime dramas have been omitted although one could argue that the omission of network crime dramas like *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-) is similarly problematic. The choice to omit foreign crime dramas like *Sherlock* (BBC One, 2010-), *The Fall* (BBC Two, 2013-), *Peaky Blinders* (BBC Two, 2013-) and *Luther* (BBC One, 2010-) is based in two factors. First, the central unit of narration for post-network crime dramas is the season. Typically, American post-network crime dramas have seasons that include twelve or thirteen episodes. In contrast, BBC shows have seasons with only three episodes, although each individual episodes tends to be longer. Second, it is significantly more difficult to locate foreign shows on status hierarchies. In the past, one could safely place any BBC drama above most American dramas. Yet, in the post-network era, there is little reason to believe American audiences understand foreign television in this way. Despite these omissions, the typology presented here is representative of American crime drama..

The only culturally legitimated crime dramas are *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Breaking Bad*. It is frequently thought that these dramas are distinguished by the intent of their creators. David Chase, creator and showrunner of *The Sopranos*, for example, often disparages American television. When asked to describe how *The Sopranos* differs from television more broadly, Chase replies, “The function of an hour drama is to reassure the American people that it's O.K. to go out and buy stuff. It's all about flattering the audience, making them feel as if all the authority figures have our best interests at heart” (Heffernan 2004). In subsequent interviews, it becomes clear that Chase's understands his labor in artistic terms. Discussing the show's controversial final scene, he says, “To me the question is not whether Tony lived or died, and that's all that

people wanted to know: 'Well, did he live or did he die? You didn't finish the show. You didn't answer the question.' That's preposterous. There was something else I was saying that was more important than whether Tony Soprano lived or died" (Coyle 2012. Like Chase, the creator of *The Wire*, David Simon, claims to be doing something other than making traditional television crime drama. In his pitch to HBO executives, Simon (2000) writes, "… as with the best HBO series, *The Wire* will be far more than a cop show, and to the extent that it breaks new ground it will do so because of larger, universal themes that more to do with the human condition, the nature of the American city, and indeed, the national culture." In these comments, the legitimation of these shows quite clearly relies on the denigration of traditional television.

Yet, more significantly, these shows are distinguished by their critical reception. Beyond earning the highest metascores of any show in the genre, critical discussions of the best television shows of all-time invariably focus on *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Breaking Bad* (Goodman 2013; St. John 2013; Pazienza 2013; Klosterman 2011; Kuo and Wu 2012). In addition, these shows make clear that the hyper-masculine anti-hero is character most closely associated with television's elevated status. As Martin (2013) notes, "the Troubled Man" is the "Third Golden Age's primary character" (228).

Not surprisingly, cable crime dramas with female protagonists including *The Killing*, *Homeland*, *The Bridge*, and *The Divide* have not achieved similar levels of prestige as the shows in the culturally legitimated category. Newman and Levine (2012) argue that the cultural legitimacy of prime-time drama more heavily relies on gendered hierarchies. In particular, the use of "terms such as 'original,' 'edgy,' 'complex,' and 'sophisticated'" in the discourses

Chart 3.5:

Culturally Legitimated	
The Sopranos	
The Wire	
Breaking Bad	

High Status	
The Shield	*Homeland*
Dexter	*The Americans* (FX, 2013-)
Justified	*Boardwalk Empire*
True Detective	*Fargo (FX, 2014-)*
Sons of Anarchy	*White Collar*
Burn Notice	*The Divide* (WETV, 2014)
The Bridge (FX, 2013-14)	*The Closer*
Murder in the First (TNT, 2014-)	*Southland* (NBC, TNT, 2009-13)[40]

Low Status	
Leverage (TNT, 2008-12)	*The Glades* (A&E, 2010-13)
Memphis Beat (TNT, 2010-11)	*Dark Blue* (TNT, 2009-10)
Longmire (A&E, 2012-14)	*Rizzoli & Isles*
Copper (BBC America, 2012-13)[41]	*Covert Affairs* (USA, 2000-)
In Plain Sight (USA, 2008-12)	*Low Winter Sun* (AMC, 2013)
Perception (TNT, 2012-14)	*Mob City* (TNT, 2013)
Banshee (Cinemax, 2013-)	*Graceland* (USA, 2013-)
	Major Crimes (TNT, 2012-)

40 *Southland* aired on NBC for one season and then on TNT for four additional seasons.

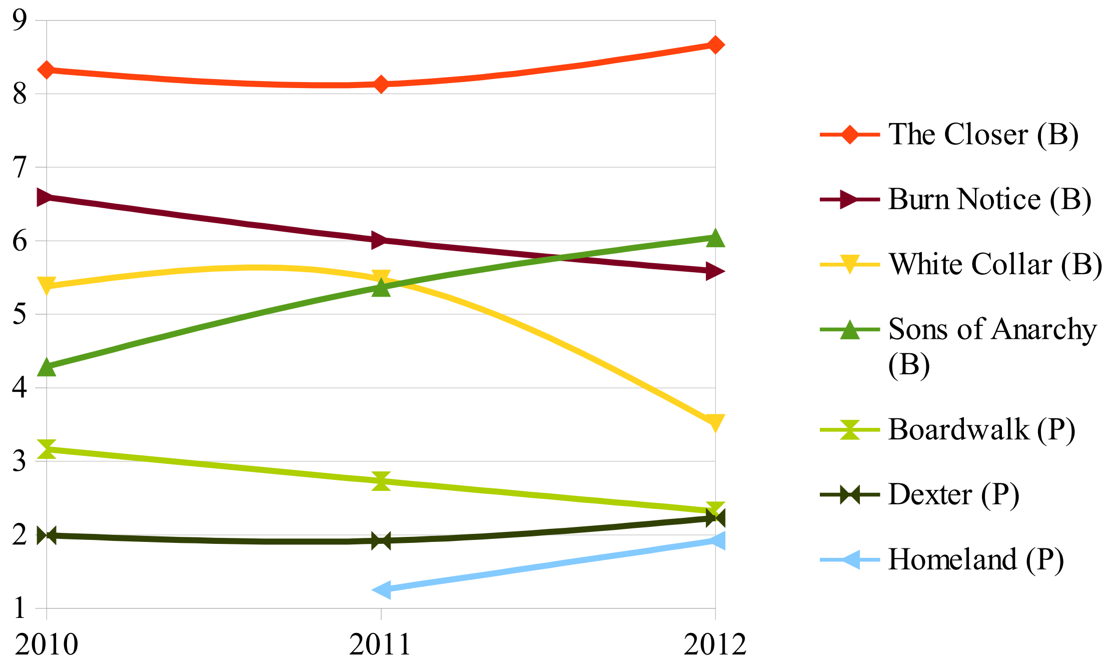
41 Unlike other American cable networks considered here, BBC America is jointly owned by the BBC and AMC networks. *Copper* was the first original series produced by BBC America. The show was created by Tom Fontana who was a writer/producer on a variety of showing including *Oz* and *Homicide*. In addition, Barry Levinson signed on as executive producer. As the show was intended for an American audience, I have chose to include it here.

surrounding such texts “functions to privilege serialized storytelling above other kinds of TV narrative” (81). Yet, these discourses largely omit the genre most historically associated with such television narratives: the day-time soap opera. When soap opera is mentioned, it is as either a brief acknowledgment that televisual seriality predates the post-network era or to establish relative value as in negative reviews using the term as a pejorative. In addition, at the level of the text, post-network serialized drama “masculinize a denigrated form, negating and denying the feminized other upon which their status depends” (82) by differentiating themselves from soap operas and their feminine audiences.

Limiting the category of culturally legitimated crime drama to *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Breaking Bad* is supported by the distribution of industry awards. *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos* were nominated for a total of 170 Emmy awards, winning thirty-seven. Despite never winning an Emmy (and only being nominated twice), *The Wire* nonetheless belongs in this category. In 2004, the show won a prestigious Peabody Award, which recognizes excellence in television and radio broadcasting. In addition, an increasing number of cultural elites had come to believe the it was “surely the best TV show ever broadcast in America” (Weisberg 2006).

Frequently, high status shows including *Homeland*, *Dexter*, and *Boardwalk Empire* arecreated with artistic or critical intentions that resemble those of cultural legitimated dramas. In addition, these shows include protagonists played by actors with serious Hollywood pedigrees. Many of the shows in this category are connected to higher status cultural forms like literature and film through creative talent or at the level of the text. Many of the characters in *Justified* first appeared in a short story by well-known crime writer Elmore Leonard. *Fargo* is an adaptation of

Chart 3.6:



the Joel and Ethan Coen's Academy Award-winning movie of the same name. Famed director Martin Scorsese was one of *Boardwalk Empire*'s executive producers and directed the pilot episode. The show's creator Terence Winter received writing credits on twenty-five episodes of *The Sopranos*. Nic Pizzolatto, showrunner of *True Detective*, was a successful novelist and literature professor. Not surprisingly, high status cable crime dramas are consistently well-reviewed. Nonetheless, they are not critically celebrated in the same way as culturally legitimated shows.

Yet, within the category of high status shows, there is significant variation in terms of ratings. The category includes *Sons of Anarchy*, *White Collar*, *Burn Notice*, and *The Closer*. These shows are some of the highest rated programs on basic cable. High-status shows on premium cable including *Boardwalk*, *Dexter* and *Homeland* receive significantly lower ratings. In discussion of status hierarchies, the tension between popularity and status is often taken-for-granted. I refer to this as the "Hootie and the Blowfish paradox," which reveals the inverse relationship between quantitative popularity and cultural status. The band's debut album, *Cracked Rear View* (1994), was the best-selling album of 1995 (New York Times Staff 1996), went on to be certified platinum sixteen times (Billboard News 2003), and remains the sixteenthbest-selling US album of all-time (B. David 2003). Yet, when a cultural product is so widely embraced, questions of quality and substance are inevitable. Describing the band's follow-up effort *Fairweather Johnson* (1996) as "its predecessor's artistic equal" and "the musical equivalent of Mom's chocolate chip cookies and a big glass of milk ... paired with lyrics that reek of Hallmark-card sentimentality," music critic Jim DeRogatis (1996) concludes his

scathing review by asking, “More than 8 million buyers can’t be wrong. Or can they?” The crux of the paradox is the following: for something to be so massively popular, it must build an audience across a wide variety of demographic groups; yet, by appealing to a variety of demographic groups including whomever constitutes the derisively labeled “lowest common denominator,” a cultural text is no longer able to reward high status audiences’ cultural capital. In the context of contemporary American television, the tension between popularity and status is revealed in the inverse relationship between audience size and critical esteem as the most popular shows have little cultural status while the highest status shows are significantly less popular.

In addition, critical responses to high-status shows are often mixed or indifferent. For example, following a heavily mocked CIA plot twist at the end of *Sons of Anarchy*'s fourth season, showrunner Kurt Sutter's (2011) comments about critical expectations provide some insight. In a blog post title, “CRITICS LAMENT...WHAT IS SONS OF ANARCHY?” (all caps in the original), he writes:

> It seems that *SOA* continues to delight and frustrate critics/reviewers/bloggers/guys-that-haven't-been-laid-since-911 … But a lot of critics don't seem to understand what I'm trying to do season after season. It's like going to see a Summer blockbuster movie and being disappointed because it's not as complex as the Godfather. Some critics get it. Ken Tucker, Matt Zoller Seitz revel in the giddy truth. [Alan] Sepinwall and others continue to bang their heads against a wall, applying a level of analysis that is best reserved for a David Simon show. *The Wire*, we ain't, nor do we aspire to be. For the record, *SOA* is an adrenalized soap opera, it's bloody pulp fiction with highly complex characters.

Like these comments indicate about *Sons of Anarchy*, some high status cable crime dramas make no claims to artistic greatest or cultural legitimation.

Unlike *Sons of Anarchy*, however, many shows in this category lack morally ambiguous protagonists. Discussing *Burn Notice*, for example, showrunner Matt Nix asserts, “It would be fair to say that *Burn Notice* is a show that doesn’t have a lot of episodes where the bad guys straight-up win” (Kompanek and Ryan 2010).[42] Similarly, when asked if an upcoming season will have a “darker tone,” *White Collar*'s showrunner Jeff Eastin, replies, “This next season, our focus is to keep it the fun, witty banter show but at the same time really ground the world so that it never becomes slapstick, it never becomes broad comedy. That's the real key this year: ground everyone, the world, ground the crimes” (Ng 2013).

There are several different types of low status cable crime drama. Many are procedurals that largely resemble traditional network content. As critic June Thomas observes, “Procedurals are the worker bees of television. The tireless toil of cops, doctors, lawyers, forensic scientists, and federal agents produces sweet ratings honey” (2012b). Several low status shows are very popular. For example, both *Rizzoli & Isles* was among the top ten returning shows in 2011 (Rice 2011). Yet, it was panned by critics. Other low status shows are failed attempts at creating a prestige drama. AMC's *Low Winter Sun* (2013), for example, drew early comparisons to *The Wire* and *The Shield* but was, nonetheless, canceled after one season. As *Huffington Post* TV critic Maureen Ryan (2013) observes:

> Any TV show that invokes the idea of cop-on-cop violence, as

42 Nix continues, “There are some shows where that happens, you know. You have an episode of *The Shield* where the bad guy just gets away. [*Burn Notice*] falls generally into the category of entertainment that is about watching people resolve a problem one way or another.” Regarding the show's protagonist, he claims, “I don’t think, particularly now, that Michael is an uncomplicated hero … one of the things that we play with is this idea that his compulsion to be a good guy is not necessarily healthy. His compulsion to be a good guy comes from a specific psychological background that has to do with his identification with victims and problems with victimizers and that kind of thing.”

> *Low Winter Sun* does in its opening minutes, has to contend with the taut legacy of *The Shield*, a genuinely entertaining cop show that intelligently explored many different flavors of compromise and morality. *Low Winter Sun*, on the other hand, is never quite free of the sound of clanking plot machinery; though a series of dilemmas are efficiently set up in the first two episodes, it's difficult to care about the pressures on various characters, given how generic they are and how predictable and overwrought the whole enterprise feels.

TNT's *Mob City* (2013), a neo-noir historical crime drama created by Frank Darabont whose directorial film credits include *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *The Green Mile* (1999), was a similar attempt to by a cable network to generate prestige and was similarly canceled after one season.

Although the status hierarchy of prime-time cable crime drama can be divided into the status groups described above, the increasing number of such shows presents a separate problem. As previously mentioned, the number of scripted series produced for basic and premium cable channels has increased by 1000% since 1999 (Littleton 2014). In addition, 145 scripted original prime-time series and miniseries have been aired by broadcast and cable networks in 2014, a fourteen percent increase over the same time period in the previous year. Furthermore, without considering digital outlets, at least 350 new and returning series have been ordered for 2015's television production cycle.[43] In the next two sections, I address the factors that influenced the selection of the particular premium cable and basic cable crime dramas to be considered through critical audience reception research.

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43 Although exact figures are unavailable, original content orders by digital outlets including Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu could raise the number of television series in production substantially. For example, Netflix Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos recently stated the streaming service hopes to expand its original content production to approximately twenty new seasons a year (Luckerson 2014).

Choosing Premium Cable Crime Dramas

The selection of premium cable crime dramas to explicitly include in this dissertation research was rather straightforward. When this fieldwork was undertaken, three subscriber supported cable networks had produced prime-time crime dramas: HBO, Showtime (SHO), and Starz. Yet, the limited success of Starz's original crime dramas *Crash* (2008-2009), inspired by the movie of the same name, and *Magic City* (2012-2013) indicated that find viewers familiar with these shows might be problematic.[44] As a consequence, the choice to focus on crime dramas produced by HBO and Showtime was the most practical option.

In many ways, Showtime's brand identity resembles that of HBO, as described above. Most obviously, the network used the slogan “TV. At Its Best.” until 2011 when it was replaced with “Brace Yourself.” In addition, much of Showtime’s success is attributed to the network’s former president of entertainment Robert Greenblatt. Greenblatt’s background at HBO has drawn attention to his move to Showtime by reinforcing his relationship to his past work on a premium cable channel and his own reinvention of HBO’s quality television strategy for the Showtime network (Wallenstein 2010). Yet, in contrast to HBO's emphasis on hour-long drama, Showtime’s network identity is associated with the reconfiguration of the sitcom and drama into the half-hour “dramedy” format, the ability to attract “brand-name leads,” and to market its product beyond the boundaries of acceptable network television content (Bradshaw 2013, 163).

Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Showtime has less status than HBO. As one critic

44 Starz's most successful original drama was *Boss* (2011-2012), a political drama starring Kelsy Grammer as Tom Kane, the mayor of Chicago recently been diagnosed with a degenerative neurological disorder.

notes, Goodman notes, “Greenblatt was so successful that he made 'HBO or Showtime?' a legitimate question among debating subscribers. But when he left Showtime during the summer [of 2010], the channel had become all too predictable in its black humor-heavy half-hour 'comedies' starring women of a certain age” (Goodman 2010). As Bradshaw (2013) argues, criticism of “female problem” narratives on Showtime frequently dovetail with comparisons to HBO that largely position the former as inferior to the latter. The consequences of this status difference for this research however is limited by fact that Showtime had not produced very many hour-long prime-time crime dramas. In fact, they had only produced two: *Dexter* and *Homeland*. Consequently, the choice to recruit young-adults who had seen significant portions of *The Sopranos* or *The Wire* or were current viewers of *Boardwalk Empire*, *Dexter*, or *Homeland* was not difficult. In addition, this selection provided a measure of status variation as *Boardwalk Empire*, *Dexter*, and *Homeland* cannot be considered culturally legitimated in the same sense as either *The Sopranos* or *The Wire*. Each of these shows is described before addressing the selection of basic cable crime dramas in the next section.

As briefly discussed above, *The Sopranos* is centered on fictional New Jersey-based Italian-American mobster Tony Soprano played by the late James Gandolfini. Created by David Chase whose previous television writing credits include *The Rockford Files*, *I'll Fly Away*, and *Northern Exposure*, the show depicts its protagonist struggle with the competing demands of his home life and the work of organized crime. Following a panic attack in the pilot episode, Tony begins to see a psychiatrist, Jennifer Melfi, played by Lorraine Bracco, and the conflicting nature of demands made by his two families frequently emerges during therapy. In addition to focusing

on the protagonist, the series includes story arcs featuring Tony's wife Carmela, played by Edie Falco, his children, and his cousin/protégé Christopher Moltisanti, played by Michael Imperioli. In addition to his crimes which range from extortion to murder, Tony's moral standing is further complicated by his overt racial prejudice. When meeting his daughter's half African-American, half-Jewish boyfriend, for example, Tony makes no attempt to conceal his bigotry (S03E02). During the exchange Tony tells the young man, "So we do understand each other? You're a *ditsoon*? A charcoal briquette? A *mulignan*?"[45] When the young man asks Tony what his problem is, Tony responds, "I think you know what my problem is. You see your little friend up there? She didn't do you any favors bringing you into this house. Now I dunno what the fuck she was thinkin'. We'll get to that later. See, I got business associates who are black and they don't want my son with their daughters and I don't want their sons with mine." In this instance, and throughout the series, Tony remains unrepentant about his overt racism. According to Polan (2009), to avoid the risk of alienating viewers, *The Sopranos* relies on racist behaviours and actions to establish a relationship with its urban, educated audiences as the show "plays into stereotypes to play on them" (121).

Created by former-journalist David Simon whose television writing credits include the Emmy-winning mini-series *The Corner* (HBO, 2000) and later seasons of *Homicide: Life on the Streets*, *The Wire* is centered on the city of Baltimore, MD. Each of the show's five seasons is primarily concerned with a different city institution which are, in order, the illegal drug trade, the seaport system, the city government and bureaucracy, the school system, and the print news

45 *Ditsoon* is an Italian word meaning "burnt" and is used as a derogatory term for people with dark skin. *Mulignan*, derived from the Italian word *melanzana* meaning "eggplant," is a derogatory term that Italian-Americans have historically used to refer to African-Americans.

media. As Simon (2004) has written, “Swear to God, it isn't a cop show. Really, it isn't. An though there be cops and gangsters aplenty, it isn't actually a crime show” (2). Despite featuring a large cast of little known character actors and never winning any major industry awards, *The Wire* continues to be discussed as the best television show ever produced. In particular, The Wire is known for its “authentic” portrayal of life in Baltimore. In an op-ed piece for the *Washington Post*, Harvard's William Julius Wilson justifies building a course addressing urban inequality around a prime-time cable drama by noting, “*The Wire* is fiction, but it forces us to confront social realities more effectively than any other media production in the era of so-called reality TV. It does not tie things up neatly; as in real life, the problems remain unsolved, and the cycle repeats itself as disadvantages become more deeply entrenched” (Chaddha and Wilson 2010). Like Wilson, many educators use this piece of popular culture as a means to bring structural inequality to the attention of their students. In the broadest sense, the amount of academic attention paid to *The Wire* is nothing short of remarkable as the historically low status of television ensured its exclusion from established taste hierarchies. Regarding the discipline of sociology in particular, Penfold-Mounce, Beer, and Burrows (2011) claim that the show is “an uncommonly effective and deep exploration of contemporary socio-political themes” that can “best be approached as a form of *social science fiction*. As a work of fiction it certainly accomplishes the telling of a certain kind of ‘truth’ …” (154).

Based on Jeff Lindsay's novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004), the Showtime series follows eponymous protagonist Dexter Morgan. Played by actor Michael C. Hall, Dexter is a sociopathic serial killer masquerading as a “normal guy” who works as a blood spatter expert for

the Miami Police Department. Yet, rather than killing random victims, Dexter only murders other serial killers he has identified while performing the various duties of his day job. Adhering to a strict moral code imposed upon him by his father Harry, the character's dark impulses act as the impetus for social serve as he only murders those who have escaped or evaded the justice offered by law enforcement and the legal system. Each season of *Dexter* is structured in relation to the protagonist's conflict with a specific villain. In season one, for example, Dexter pursues the “Ice Truck Killer” who is actually his own brother. After eight seasons, the series ended with a significant amount of controversy. After his sister's death, Dexter decides to abandon his girlfriend and son by driving his boat into the eye of an approaching hurricane. After the storm passes, the audience gets a glimpse of Dexter alive and working as a lumberjack. The finale was largely decried as a terrible ending to series that was already past its prime. Distributing *Dexter* has also generated problems for Showtime. In 2011, the network pulled *Dexter* from Netflix's streaming service. According to then-CEO Matthew Blank, “We're more conscious of [the competition] now. With all the options out there, we want to be sure people know they have to subscribe to see *Dexter* or *The Borgias*” (Seidman 2011). With the series concluding, however, in October 2013, Showtime struck a deal allowing Netflix to resume streaming the series.

Unlike the other premium cable crime dramas included in this research, HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* is a historical crime drama. Set during Prohibition, the narrative focus of the series is Atlantic City bootlegger and kingpin Nucky Thompson, played by Steve Buschemi. The show, created by Terrence Winter who received writing credits on twenty-five episodes of The Sopranos, was inspired by Nelson Johnson's book *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times,*

and Corruption of Atlantic City (2010) which was about historical criminal kingpin Enoch L. Johnson. Costing somewhere between $18 million (Littleton 2010) and $30 million (Chozick 2010) to produce, the pilot episode included a $5 million, 300 foot long boardwalk built in the style of Atlantic City circa 1920 and was directed by Martin Scorsese who was also an executive producer on the series. McCabe (2013) notes that the pilot conforms to HBO's brand image through a variety of mechanisms. She writes, "Just as the series creates a protean world of mobsters, a mythology in the making in fact, the Pilot establishes its own artistic worth as a distinct and highly original piece of TV art" (188). The pilot also pays "homage to the past contribution of Scorsese to the gangster genre (shocking violence, corporeal matter splattered over the lens), but also to the American cinema of the early twentieth century, including the archaic iris in and iris out transitions bookending the episode" (192). In addition, *Boardwalk* relies on highbrow intertextuality although not as extensively as *The Sopranos*. In the pilot, for example, after learning that a slow-witted subordinate had changed his name, Thompson tells the man, "A rose by any other name." In response to this reference to Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, the man replies, "What's that supposed to mean?" Thompson offers a look disgust and states, "Read a fucking book."

Developed by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, *Homeland* is an adaptation of the Israeli series *Prisoners of War*. Perhaps better classified as a spy drama than a crime drama, the series focuses on Carrie Mathison (played by Claire Danes), a Central Intelligence Agency officer with bipolar disorder. This series begins on site in Iraq where Mathison compulsively conducts an unauthorized operation alone in which she enters an Iraqi prison to gain information from her.

imprisoned informant. Although she barely escapes from the prison, she is able to talk with her informant who warns her that an American prisoner of war has been turned by Al-Qaeda and plans to launch an attack on American soil. Despite the fact that Carrie's operation in Iraq resulted in the discovery of imperative information, the extreme danger and unwarranted nature of her operation resulted in probation. She is unwillingly transferred to the CIA's Counter-terrorism Center in Langley, Virginia. After adapting to her reassignment, Carrie and her new unit receive intelligence that a U.S. Marine Sergeant, Nicholas Brody (played by Damien Lewis), has been rescued after being held captive and tortured by terrorists for eight years. Upon return, Sgt. Brody is portrayed as a war hero and American icon to the public. In light of her recent insight from her imprisoned informant, Carrie becomes suspicious of Brody who struggles to adjust to his life with his wife and two kids, who were shocked to discover that he was alive after eight years. *Homeland*'s first two seasons received notable awards including the 2012 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series, the 2011 and 2012 Golden Globe Awards for Best Television Series - Drama, and the Primetime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Lead Actress and Lead Actor in a Drama series.

Choosing Basic Cable Crime Dramas

In comparison to premium cable crime drama, the process choosing which basic cable crime dramas to include in this research is more complicated. Advertiser supported cable networks producing crime dramas include TNT, TBS, USA, FX, A&E, and WETV. In addition, basic cable crime dramas are more quantitatively popular than their counterparts on premium

cable. For example, the series finale of *Dexter* averaged about 2.8 million viewers (Kissell 2013), according to Nielsen estimates that include same-night DVR playback while, three months earlier, the season four premier of *Rizzoli & Isles* attracted 6.6 million total viewers (Webb Mitovich 2013). Furthermore, the status differences among basic cable crime dramas are more extreme that in premium cable.

With these issues in mind, I selected quantitatively popular basic cable crime dramas with comparatively low metascores. Six shows met these criteria: *Burn Notice*, *Covert Affairs*, *The Closer*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Rizzoli & Isles*, and *White Collar*. Yet, since both *Burn Notice* and *Covert Affairs* are crime dramas that incorporate elements from the spy thriller genre, there was not a need to include both and *Covert Affairs* was dropped. As such, the five remaining shows reflect the variety of the category in terms of both status and popularity. Each is described below.

Starring Kyra Sedgwick as Brenda Leigh Johnson, *The Closer* is a TNT procedural whose protagonist is a Los Angeles Police Department Deputy Chief. With a reputation as a "closer," an interrogator who not only solves a case, but obtains confessions that lead to convictions thereby so "closing" the case, Brenda sometimes uses deceit and intimidation to persuade a suspect to confess. The cast consists largely of an ensemble of detectives who make up the LAPD's fictional Major Crimes Division with each character possessing expertise in a specific area, such as crime scene investigation or gang activity. After a seven-season run, The Closer ended when Sedgwick did not sign a new contract. However, the show was spun-off and the cast, minus Sedgwick, returned to TNT to join the new series *Major Crimes* (2013-). Starring Mary McDonnell as Captain Sharon Raydor, *Major Crimes* is a spin-off in the truest sense and not a

reboot or some other type of re-imagining.

USA's *Burn Notice* follows the adventures of former spy Michael Westen (Jeffrey Donovan). After being “burned” by the CIA, Westen is reluctantly drawn into working as an unlicensed private investigator and problem solver for ordinary citizens to fund his personal investigation into his situation as a blacklisted agent. Each week, the protagonist and his small crew of friends battle an array of criminals such as mobsters, gang members, con artists, murderers, rapists, kidnappers, foreign wet-work operatives, drug traffickers, sex traffickers, arms traffickers, and war criminals. The series juggles these two narratives: the overall series dealing with why Michael was burned, and individual episodes focusing on the cases he works for clients.

To capitalize on the success of *The Shield*, in late 2007, FX unveiled a multimillion dollar re-branding campaign and the new tag-line “There is No Box.” *Sons of Anarchy*, the first drama introduced after this re-branding, debuted alongside the start of *The Shield*’s seventh and final season. Created by former *Shield* writer and producer Kurt Sutter and set within the fictional town of Charming in Northern California’s Central Valley, the show chronicles the *Sons of Anarchy*. The club's main source of income comes from illegal weapons purchased from from an Irish Republican Army splinter group and resold to other criminal organizations. Other revenue streams include prostitution, pornography, drug running and extortion. With narrative elements that resemble Shakespearean drama (Sheffield 2012) and soap opera melodrama (Lotz 2011), the show’s central conflict is between the young prince Jax Teller (Charlie Hunnam) and the usurper Clay Morrow (Ron Perlman).

Based on the series of novels by Tess Gerritsen, *Rizzoli & Isles* is a TNT procedural drama featuring police detective Jane Rizzoli (Angie Harmon) and medical examiner Dr. Maura Isles (Sasha Alexander). Despite their contrasting personalities and styles, these protagonists have a good working relationship as evidenced by their ability to solve some of Boston's most heinous crimes. Former *Sopranos* regular Lorraine Bracco plays the role of Rizzoli's mother, Angela. As part of an original programming lineup on a general interest network, Rizzoli & Isles fit with TNT's branding strategy encapsulated by their slogan “We Know Drama.” When this slogan was introduced following a re-branding effort in 2001, Steve Koonin, executive vice president and general manager of TNT, asserted via press release, “TNT's promise is to engage the hearts and minds of our viewers with dramatic programming that offers a powerful combination of compelling stories and interesting characters, mixed with excitement, action, suspense, romance and humor” (Time Warner, Inc. 2001). Following another re-branding in 2012, the network introduced a new slogan “Drama, Period.” Most recently, in 2014, the network re-branded again and unveiled a new tagline, “TNT Drama. Boom.” Despite such re-branding efforts, however, the overall brand image of TNT remains the same. As Michael Wright, president, head of programming for TNT, TBS and Turner Classic Movies, claims in the wake of the most recent re-branding, “We’re excited to offer our audience a variety of programming – action-adventure, crime-drama, mystery and suspense – all delivering on our promise to take viewers on a thrilling ride and leave them satisfied at the end” (L. A. Ross 2014).

USA's *White Collar* is centered on the relationship between FBI Special Agent Peter Burke (Tim Dekay) and his informant Neal Caffrey (Matt Bomer), a con artist, forger and thief.

After being arrested by Burke, Neal proposes he become an FBI consultant, in exchange for early release. Burke agrees on the condition Neal wears an ankle monitor. Despite being given the opportunity to build a new, honest life for himself, Neal often craves his old life, forcing him to choose between the two. When *White Collar* premiered in 2009, it was positioned as an extension of USA's existing branding strategy associated with the slogan “Characters Welcome.” The network spent an estimated $10 million to launch the series and its ad campaign included promotional materials with clever phrases including “The world’s smartest criminal is now the F.B.I.’s newest agent” and “To solve the hardest crimes, hire the smartest criminal” (Elliott 2009). Unlike many post-network cable crime dramas, *White Collar* is intentionally light in tone. According to network president Bonnie Hammer, ““We won’t greenlight a show if it doesn’t feel it belongs on USA” (Elliott 2009). “What separates us from the others is that the characters have to be relatable,” she continues, meaning they are “quirky, exceptional, just a little off,” without being “dysfunctional” or exuding “negativity.” And for *White Collar* in particular, “we don’t want to go into the darker, bleaker world of thievery.”

Conclusion:

Addressing middle-class audience reception of the five premium cable and five basic cable crime dramas discussed above would be useful for three reasons. First, narrowing the post-network landscape provides an opportunity to examine the ways in which audiences navigate TV's emerging hierarchies. Focusing on viewers of these cable crime dramas, it becomes possible to recruit participants who are viewers of shows from multiple parts of the status

hierarchy. As the cultural legitimacy of post-network television is closely associated with HBO, incorporating the distinction between premium (subscriber supported) and basic (advertiser supported) cable crime drama is crucial. Yet, it was equally necessary to include higher status and lower status shows within the categories of premium and basic cable. In doing so, a variety of issues have been taken in account. As I describe in the next chapter, factors like the creative pedigree of individual showrunners and the brand identity of cable networks are significant in the context of middle-class audience reception.

Second, the middle-class audience reception practices associated with cable crime drama will complicate Newman and Levine's (2012) understanding of cultural status in the post-network era. Although these authors invoke Bourdieu at several points in their analysis,[46] nonetheless they largely treat legitimation as a total state. Discussing ABC's science fiction and supernatural drama *Lost*,[47] Newman and Levine (2012) claim:

> Legitimation allows a particular text to be both "cult" and "blockbuster" at the same time, the idea being that the text is of such exceptional quality that a larger audience than the fringe cult

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46 After quoting Bourdieu in their introduction for example ("In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others" (1984, 56)), Newman and Levine (2012) note, "Within the discourse of television's legitimation, we see this powerful negation through the construction of divergent conceptions of television texts, technologies, and audiences, some of which are elevated to a newly respectable status and some of which are associated with the medium's past and its historical lower class and feminine identities" (7). They also reference Bourdieu's notion of charisma in their discussions of "the showrunner as *auteur*" (39). The final reference to Bourdieu occurs in the analysis of "technologies of agency" including the DVR and "on-demand" digital content. Newman and Levine (2012) write, "Repetition is central to cult and fan experiences, but it is also a way of extending the modes of appreciation of traditional art worlds to television. It leads toward the consecration of classics, whether cult or not, experienced in the formalist mode of aesthetic appreciation which Bourdieu notes is a hallmark of bourgeois culture" (140).

47 The series follows the survivors of the crash of a commercial passenger jet, flying between Sydney and Los Angeles, on a mysterious tropical island somewhere in the South Pacific Ocean.

> must necessarily appreciate it. That such a belief still manages to flatter the tastes of the "cult blockbuster" viewer demonstrates the ways that distinction remains a central motivator behind the cult label, even when it is applied to a relatively popular text.

Moving past the oxymoron "cult blockbuster," to claim *Lost* as a culturally legitimated post-network television drama is to fundamentally ignore status distinctions between science fiction and realist drama and network and basic cable drama. In addition, discussing *Lost* in the same context as *The Sopranos* implies that a "tentpole" (Clarke 2012) drama produced for coalition audiences by a major broadcast network and a anti-heroic drama produced for niche audiences in a subscriber-supported economic environment are playing the same status game.

Yet, there is little evidence to indicate that this might be true. In his analysis of "transmedia television, Clarke (2012) argues that broadcast networks respond to the economic uncertainty of the post-network era with an increased emphasis on shows that can serve as a "tentpole" for a variety of other texts that create additional opportunities to generate revenue. By watching the first broadcast of a new episode of a tentpole show, viewers pay an initial tax through their engagement with the on-air series. This provides them with the necessary knowledge and interest to buy or invest time in subsequent, transmedia manifestations of the franchise.

As has been discussed above, however, the economic realities of a subscriber-based cable network like HBO eliminate the need to build coalition audiences. As a broadcast network, coalition audiences provide ABC with the ability to leverage additional revenue from advertisers as a result of the increased likelihood that commercials that air during highly rated shows will be seen by many individual viewers thereby increasing sales, brand awareness, or whatever else

advertisers hope to achieve with marketing dollars. In the case of *Lost*, cliffhangers, clues, and other textual features are intended to drive viewers to ABC's website after the show ends where fans can discuss what just happened or speculate about future episodes. Once *Lost* viewers visit ABC's website after the show, ABC has effectively opened an additional revenue stream as advertisers are equally willing to buy online ads if they believe they have an opportunity to reach their desired markets. Critical audience analysis of middle-class viewers in the post-network era can provide a framework for understanding the distinctions between television shows and genres and then relate such distinctions back to structural issues.

Lastly, empirical research addressing middle-class viewers of cable crime drama has the ability to speak to the ways in which reception practices vary with both the status of audiences and the status of texts. As noted in the previous chapter, the dearth of audience studies research in the post-network era ensures that little is known about the relationship between post-network audiences and social class. In addition, the research on fans that takes into account the status of texts only does so by using the reductive binary of mainstream status and cult status. As a result, the elevation of cult texts positions them as exceptions to the broader rule which states that television is a “vast wasteland.” In addition, the audience “activity” fans believe cult texts demand of them supports their conceptions of themselves as exceptional. Yet, there is little evidence that the elevation of cult texts or fan modes of engagement are in any broad sense related to cultural legitimation as a social process intimately related to inequality. Empirical research addressing middle-class viewers of cable crime drama can speak to both of these issues.

CHAPTER IV

NAVIGATING POST-NETWORK HIERARCHIES:

MIDDLE-CLASS YOUNG-ADULTS AND CABLE CRIME DRAMA

Introduction:

This chapter is a qualitative examination of middle-class audience reception practices as they are related to prime-time cable crime drama. By focusing exclusively on prime-time cable crime drama, it is possible to identify the ways in which audience reception varies with the social location of middle-class viewers and with the cultural status of particular texts. This chapter begins with a brief consideration of the few studies that address audiences of cable crime drama. To compensate for the dearth of research addressing audiences of television drama, scholarship addressing European comedy audiences is used to generate expectations regarding viewer engagement with status hierarchies. Next, I describe the methods used in this portion of the dissertation. The sample includes thirty-one middle-class young-adults. As in chapter two, individuals with post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered "privileged" middle-class young-adults. The findings are presented in three sub-sections.

Among privileged middle-class young-adults, the reception practices associated with cable crime drama include three common features: assertions that the difference between network and cable shows has status implications, positive attitudes regarding textual features that

deviate from network era norms, and attempts to distance themselves from network content and audiences. Despite the commonality of these practices, there is variation among privileged middle-class young-adults. Viewers of both culturally legitimated and high-status cable crime dramas differ from their peers in three ways. First, they are explicitly appreciative of content that does not cater to traditional audience needs. Second, this subset of privileged middle-class young-adults frequently invoke discourses of legitimation that connect television to high-status cultural forms. Third, with a broader knowledge of cable crime drama, these privileged middle-class young-adults make fine-grain status distinctions within the genre.

Among middle-class young-adults more broadly, the audience reception practices associated with cable crime drama are oriented toward textual features. Issues like narrative structure and the appeal of characters are particularly significant. In contrast with privileged respondents, however, the distinction between network and cable crime drama is not significant and little attention is given to the status of particular shows. Yet, these middle-class respondents acknowledge that their engagement with cable crime drama is distinct from their other television viewing practices. Nonetheless, their discussions of anti-heroic protagonists lack the conflicted moral allegiance typically associated with viewer attachment to such characters.

After presenting data regarding the ways in which audience reception of cable crime drama varies with the social location of middle-class viewers, the scope of the analysis narrows to a single cable crime drama. Although it was not explicitly addressed by the research methodology, more than half of the respondents in this sample are viewers of *Breaking Bad*. After briefly providing some background information, the findings demonstrate that among the

middle-class young-adults in the sample understandings of *Breaking Bad* as a post-network text and the show's protagonist vary with social location.

Discussing these findings, I argue that the reception practices of privileged middle-class viewers reflect some of the ways in which diverse cultural consumption and the performance of status-based distinction coexist. As such, this research finds a degree of similarity between American audiences of television drama and European audiences of television comedy. This chapter concludes with a brief consideration of the limitations of the findings.

Literature Review:

Existing research addressing audience reception of prime-time cable crime drama is very limited.[48] A single study addresses viewers of *The Sopranos* (Lacey 2002) and the scope of the analysis is limited to British male viewers. Even though *The Wire* has received a considerable amount of academic attention (Potter and Marshall 2009; Kennedy and Shapiro 2012), few

48 There is also a very limited amount of fan studies research that addresses prime-time cable crime drama. For example, Lebosco (2009) addresses *The Wire*'s audience through the analysis of online fan discourse. She finds viewer responses to Omar Little (played by Michael K. Williams) vary with political orientation. Responding to a character then-Senator Barack Obama accurately describes as a "gay gangster who only robs drug dealers" (Coolican 2008), viewers express ambivalent attitudes towards homosexuality and progressive beliefs about the need for social change. Based on her examination of thousands of posts on HBO.com's fan forum for the show, LeBosco notes that the widespread adoration of the black, queer, morally ambiguous character could reflect the audience's willingness to read intersecting identities as authentic. However, such a reading cannot be applied to the socially conservative fans whose appreciation of Omar occurs only in spite of his queer sexuality. Indeed, following the character's sudden and violent death in season five, "Most viewers articulate profound sadness that Omar's arc ended in the manner that it did, claiming it was not only inconsistent with what we knew of this careful, watchful, intelligent character, but also that it was just plain unjust and wrong to do that to loyal viewers" (LeBosco, 2009, 225). Regarding social change, despite the show's reputation among critics and scholars as a consciousness-raiser, not all of the audience understands *The Wire* as a "polemic on the American dream" (LeBosco, 2009, 229). Even among those audience members who do understand the show in such ways, many cannot envision alternatives and assume the status quo is unchangeable.

scholars have conducted empirically examinations of the show's audience. McDougall (2010), for example, uses a combination of Morley's focus group approach and Gauntlett's (2007) notion of metaphorical modeling to investigate how five different groups of people attribute meaning to *The Wire* in relation to a range of social practices. For a group of “online critic-fans,” *The Wire* is authentic and their discourse reinforces the notion of the show as “real.” Another group was composed of media teachers (high school level educators) taking an online course to obtain additional professional credentials. They offered “preferred” readings that called attention to the show's complexity and the need for reflective considerations of its themes. Although the drama lecturers (university level educators), were similarly eager to discuss the show as a text, they were more inclined to address *The Wire* in the context of discourses of cultural value and also to display their distance from television as a medium. In contrast to these credentialed educators, the group of youth workers (who work with young people to engage them in informal education) largely discussed *The Wire* in relation to encountering social problems in the real world. Among undergraduate education students, discussions of *The Wire* were marked with optimism and their own hopes of “'making a difference.” With the exclusion of the online critic-fans, these findings indicate that audiences understand the text through professional frameworks in several consistent ways. Ultimately, McDougall argues, “The meanings given to *The Wire* provide an example of convergence culture' due to these ideas circulating as a hybrid between the 'post broadcast mediasphere,' and the programme’s traditional narrative form – a very long, slowly developing and complex multi-series story.” Nonetheless, in a later article, McDougall and a coauthor assert, “what this study revealed about *The Wire* is far less interesting than how the research methods

allowed for some more experimental and reflexive work with people" (Kendall and McDougall 2012, 26).

In contrast to McDougall's methodological and theoretical attention to the cultural studies tradition, Venkatesh provides a more sociological perspective in a series of posts on the Freakanomics blog. Best known for his ethnographic research on African-American street gang subculture in Chicago's Robert Taylor homes (Venkatesh 2008a), Venkatesh asked a group of active and retired criminals from the New York area to watch the fifth season of *The Wire* with him. For these respondents, reception of *The Wire* is characterized by an overriding concern for the plot. According to Venkatesh (2008b), at the conclusion of the season premiere, several wagers were made about any number of narrative arcs including the outcome of the criminal inquiry into State Senator Clay Davis (Isiah Whitlock, Jr.) and the conflict between Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector) and Proposition Joe (Robert F. Chew). Realism was also a frequent topic of discussion (Venkatesh 2008d). By and large, these respondents form affective relationships with particular characters on the basis of their own lived experiences. For example, Venkatesh (2008c) relates that Flavor, a twenty-nine year-old African-American drug dealer and the youngest of the group, felt "a strong tie" to Marlo whose ruthlessness created opportunities to dominate competitors with more experience in the drug game. Following Marlo's execution of Prop Joe (one such competitor), Flavor asserts, "I can't tell you the number of these old fools, like Prop Joe, that stand in the way when we try to make things happen. They always talk about the old days. F-ck the old days. I got kids, I got bills, I don't need no old crumpled up, fat fool telling me to give my money up to n***ers who don't do nothing for themselves." Yet, the

significance of the affective relationships formed with particular characters is unclear. Venkatesh reports that the respondents were unwilling to watch the final two episodes of the season after Flavor went missing in response to a conflict with a rival. Speaking about the decision, a former criminal in his mid-forties who ran a drug gang for fifteen years before serving a ten year prison sentence claims, "This is fun if you work all day behind a desk, or you're sitting in some suburb. But for us, it's like watching somebody make a movie about you – someone who doesn't really know all that much about your life" (Venkatesh 2008e).

The relevance of this empirical research addressing audience reception of *The Wire* for examinations of middle-class audiences and their relationships with cable crime drama is unclear. As a result of experimental methodologies and occupation as the primary analytic framework, McDougall's analysis is limited in what it can say about audiences' relationships to *The Wire* more generally. Similarly, Venkatesh's exclusive consideration of lower-class audiences provides little insight regarding *The Wire*'s middle-class audience. In addition, the majority of Venkatesh's respondents had not seen any of the show before they began watching the fifth season. As has been previously noted, *The Wire*'s complicated narrative does not lend itself to such causal viewing practices. In addition, *The Wire* differs from other post-network cable crime dramas in that the show is not driven by a single anti-heroic protagonist. The narrative focus is trained on institutions more so than individuals. There is certainly a hypermasculine, white, morally ambiguous character. However, as Mittell (2009) notes, "Jimmy McNulty is a central point of access to understand police bureaucracy and functions nominally as the show's main character, but by season four he is in the margins" (430).

The value of this research addressing audience reception of prime-time cable crime drama is further limited by additional factors. Surveys on media engagement, for example, typically “fail to take account of the possibility of a 'canon,' or hierarchy of television texts” which is particularly problematic given the increasing cultural significance of prime-time cable dramas (Wright 2011, 365). In addition, Nielsen ratings, which cannot be considered research in an academic sense (Meehan 1990), are stripped of useful demographic information when published in the television trade press and network executives at HBO plead ignorance when asked about their subscriber base (Anderson 2008, 33–34). In the next section, research addressing audience reception practices associated with television comedy provide some insight into the ways cable crime drama viewers might navigate the genre's status hierarchies.

Theory:

In response to the multitude of studies that claim eclectic taste as a mark of distinction (Van Eijck and Knulst 2005) and proclaim the demise of elite snobbery (Bennett et al. 2009), some European scholars have sought to understand the ways in which diverse cultural consumption and the performance of class-based distinction coexist through examination of TV comedy audiences (Kuipers 2006a; Kuipers 2009; S. Friedman and Kuipers 2013; S. Friedman 2014). In multi-method research exploring Dutch television audiences, Kuipers (2006b) argues that taste must be understood as both patterns of preference/aversion and as a form of cultural knowledge noting, “Knowledge always precedes appreciation: you have to be aware of something in order to like, hate or be indifferent to it. But appreciation also requires the

knowledge to decode something: to interpret shows, to recognize genres, to make meaningful taste judgments" (360). This work is particularly significant as Kuipers draws attention to the ways in which previous knowledge of a relevant genre information viewer's reception practices and attitudes towards new shows.

Survey results and qualitative interview data both indicate that the enjoyment of highbrow Dutch television comedy, a humor style characterized by irony, satire, and being "slightly avante-garde" as "the humor is often mixed with unpleasant emotions like disgust, sadness or anger" (Kuipers 2006b, 365), requires a significant amount of knowledge. In particular, Kuipers finds that many working class audience members "don't get" highbrow comedy and quickly lose interest in things that they don't understand. Rather than offering "resistant" readings which conform to the expectations of early critical audience scholarship (Hall 1980; Morley 1980), less-educated viewers have little to say about more difficult and more ambivalent content. In contrast, middle class audience members know a great deal about lowbrow comedy, which frequently relies upon stereotypes and exaggerations that are explicitly framed as humorous, and readily judge it negatively. Kuipers speculates that it is the combination of accumulated television specific knowledge and the willingness to express an opinion about any and all content that characterizes the habitus associated with highbrow consumption of Dutch comedy. In addition, the sense of aesthetic superiority that underpins middle-class judgments about lowbrow comedy similarly underpins explicit negative judgments about those who do not have the knowledge to decode highbrow comedy. Among British comedy audiences, such "aesthetic judgments meld into moral and personal verdicts on the 'worth' of those with

lowbrow taste" (S. Friedman and Kuipers 2013, 192).

Research addressing Flemish television comedy produces similar findings. Claessens and Dhoest (2010) argue that comedy tastes are connected to broader media tastes which vary according to social class and cultural capital as indicated by levels of education. Less educated respondents prefer relaxing and relatively transparent media while those with more education prefer in-depth and complex media. Regarding comedy in particular, less educated respondents have a good knowledge of and clearly prefer lowbrow comedy, while their knowledge of middle- and highbrow comedy is more restricted and their appreciation more negative. They prefer the simple humor, the recognizable nature and the stereotypical characters of lowbrow comedy, focusing on its relaxing qualities. In contrast, those with more education praise the difficult and subtle humor of middle and highbrow humor as well as its absurd, daring and surprising nature. They prefer complex characters and story lines, in line with their broader preference for complexity. They present themselves as omnivores, as they also know and watch lowbrow comedy, but they distance themselves from the latter, dismissing it as "pure entertainment" (Claessens and Dhoest 2010, 19).

Although the history of publicly funded television in European countries like England, Belgium, and the Netherlands makes it unlikely these findings will be perfectly applicable to contemporary American audiences, nonetheless, this work highlights several important issues. First, research on audiences of television comedy finds that viewers with higher levels of educational attainment possess greater knowledge of the hierarchy associated with the genre. Second, viewers with less education prefer simple, familiar narratives. Third, viewers with more

education are more likely to appreciate difficult content. Before presenting the findings related to viewers of cable crime drama and discussing the degree to which the norms among European comedy audiences apply to American audiences, the next section describes the methods employed in this portion of the research.

Methods:

Thirty-one respondents completed interviews. Nineteen identify as male, twelve identify as female. Two respondents identify as African-American, three identified as Asian, and three identify as Hispanic. The remaining twenty-four respondents identify as white although several identify themselves as members of specific white ethnic groups. Two identify as queer. All respondents are young-adults ages 18-34. As in chapter three, the sample is divided by educational attainment and occupational status. Individuals with any amount of post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered “privileged” middle-class young-adults. Occupations are considered high-status if they have scores above eighty on the Nam–Powers–Boyd Occupational Status Scale (Nam and Boyd 2004).[49] Young-adults without post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered middle-class.

Respondents were recruited with flyers posted in well-traveled areas of a mid-sized city in the mid-Atlantic region. Separate flyers were created to recruit viewers of premium and basic cable crime dramas. Reproductions of these flyers are included in the appendix. As the central narrative unit of the post-network era is the season rather than the episode, respondents are defined as viewers if they report watching a minimum of two complete seasons of a given crime

49 The list of occupations with scores above eighty is included in the appendix.

drama. Six individuals responded to the basic cable flyer and completed interviews. Twenty-five individuals responded to the premium cable flyer and completed interviews. Interviews lasting between 60-90 minutes were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interview schedule is included in the appendix. Field-notes were taken after each interview. For their time, respondents were compensated with $20 Best Buy gift cards.

In this sample, only seven of the thirty-one respondents pay for cable or satellite television at their current residence.[50] Of these seven, six pay for the digital video recording (DVR) device provided by their cable or satellite company.[51] Twenty-eight pay for internet access at their current residence although, for many, the expense is included as part of their rent. Of the three respondents who do not pay for internet access at home, one recently moved and plans to sign up, one spends the majority of their leisure time at their significant other's home which has internet access, and the third lives above a local business and uses their WiFi signal. Twenty-nine respondents report watching television content online. Of the two who do not, one reports watching television shows on DVD and the other watches live and time-shifts with a DVR. Nineteen respondents are current Netflix subscribers and four others report having used Netflix in the past.[52] Three respondents are Hulu subscribers and one uses Amazon Prime.[53] Three respondents also report using HBOGo with access provided by friends and/or family

50 Writing in the *New York Times*, Farhad Manjoo (2014) reports, "The typical American household pays about $90 a month for cable television service."

51 The costs of DVR service provided by cable or satellite companies varies widely. In the small mid-Atlantic city where much of this research was conducted, Comcast charges $16.95 per month for subscribers to rent a DVR device.

52 Netflix streaming service (as opposed to the DVD delivery service) costs $7.99 per month. In May 2014, Netflix raised its prices for new subscribers to $8.99 per month (Evers 2014).

53 Subscriptions to the Hulu Plus streaming service cost $7.99 per month; Amazon Prime memberships cost $99 per year (about $8.25 per month) and includes free two-day shipping on many items (D'Onfro 2014).

members with subscriptions to the premium network.[54] Showtime offers a similar service, "Showtime Anytime," that also requires a subscription through a cable television provider.[55]

In addition to legal means of accessing cable crime dramas, there are a host of less-than-legal means available. The TV-torrent distribution group EZTV, for example, uses web bots to make new television shows available for download within several hours after they first appear. In contrast, Sidereel is a TV show link aggregator that allows audiences to find content that is available through a "livestream." The distribution of such content often violates copyright law. The wide accessibility of post-network television content is one of contemporary television's defining elements. In fact, only one respondent reports that access is a consideration when making television choices.

The variety of mechanisms through which these respondents engage with television content reflects a fundamental reality of "convergence culture" (Jenkins 2006). Digital technology renders once distinct media forms indistinct at the level of data (binary code).[56] Before the emergence of digital technology, one could not confuse television and film as media forms. They were produced by different companies. They were distributed by different

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54 Access to HBOGo streaming service requires a subscription to HBO through a cable television provider which costs roughly $7 per month in addition to the cost of cable service (Horn 2014). Surprisingly, the practice of "account sharing" is not viewed as a problem by network executives. According to HBO CEO Richard Plepler, account sharing is "a terrific marketing vehicle for the next generation of viewers" and does not negatively impact subscription rates (Kumparak 2014). Rather than negatively impacting subscription rates, Plepler explains, the practice " presents the brand to more and more people, and gives them an opportunity hopefully to become addicted to it. What we're in the business of doing is building addicts, of building video addicts. The way we do that is by exposing our product, our brand, our shows, to more and more people."

55 Subscriptions to Showtime add roughly $10 per month to a customer's cable bill.

56 Jenkins (2006) also uses the notion of "convergence culture" to refer to corporate conglomeration with media industries and a redistribution of power in the relationships between cultural producers (media creators) and audiences (media consumers).

technology and industrial arrangements. Although there was a degree of overlap, as in the case of movies broadcast on television, nonetheless, film and television remained distinct. In the context of convergence culture enabled by digital technology, such distinctions are less salient. As a result, this research addresses audience reception of content that was initially intended for television audiences as they were traditionally understood. Thus, the specific mechanism by which an individual viewer engages with television content is less significant than the nature of that engagement.

Findings:

Privileged Middle-Class Young-Adults

Among middle-class young-adults with post-graduate education or a high-status occupation, the reception practices associated with cable crime drama include three common features. First, these respondents, consider the difference between network and cable crime drama to be a significant status distinction. Several respondents explain the difference between network crime drama and cable crime drama in terms of textual characteristics. Discussing *CSI* and *Bones*, Darren, a twenty-four year old graduate student with a master's degree in psychology, says, "Maybe this is not fair, but in my head I classify those as … I mean they're probably really entertaining and could really suck me in, but I wouldn't probably enjoy watching them that much because, my guess is that the characters don't have as much depth as some of the other shows. More or less, it's kind of a cookie-cutter recipe of how every episode goes." When asked if he watches *CSI*, *NCIS*, or *Law & Order: SVU*, Brian, a twenty-six year-old copywriter at an online

Table 4.1: Privileged Middle-Class Young-Adult Viewers of Cable Crime Drama

	Name, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity	Education	Occupation	Culturally Legitimated	High-Status
1	Brian, 26, M, white	MA	copywriter	----	*Homeland*
2	Cindy, 30, F, white	MA	graduate student	----	*Dexter, Burn Notice*
3	Darren, 24, M, white	MA	graduate student	*Wire*	----
4	Everett, 22, M, white	BA	graduate student	*Wire*	*Homeland*
5	Jamie, 23, M, white	BA	graduate student	----	*Dexter*
6	Jim, 34, M, white	BA	librarian[4]	*Sopranos, Wire*	*Boardwalk, Homeland, Dexter*
7	Josh, 26, M, white	MA	graduate student	*Wire*	*Boardwalk, Homeland*
8	Kate, 28, F, white	MA	graduate student	*Sopranos, Wire*	*Burn Notice, Closer, Dexter, Homeland*
9	Keri, 27, F, white	MA	graduate student	----	*White Collar*
10	Louis, 24, M, white	BA	engineer[5]	*Sopranos, Wire*	*Homeland*
11	Matt, 26, M, white	MA	graduate student	*Sopranos, Wire*	*Boardwalk*
12	Steve, 34, M, white	MA	scientist	----	*Dexter, Burn Notice*
13	Tim, 25, M, white	BA	financial analyst[6]	*Sopranos, Wire*	*Boardwalk*

4 Librarians, NPB score 82, rank 19.
5 Computer software engineer, NPB score 94, rank 7.
6 Financial analyst, NPB score 94, rank 7. In the two months before the interview, this respondent had left his job as a financial analyst with a well known firm to open business in the technology industry.

marketing firm, replies, “Yeah. I casually used to watch those. They were there but now I feel TV has developed. Its gone beyond that to where. I can't handle shows where I know that at the end of the show everything's going to work out. That's how I think those shows are.” After saying she prefers the cable drama *White Collar* to the network drama *Criminal Minds*, Keri, a twenty-seven year old graduate student working towards a PhD in psychology, explains, “I don't watch [*Criminal Minds*] just because it is so illogical. It's just too far unrealistic. It's like somehow every FBI case there is a psychological issue.”[57] Although Keri does make the status distinction between network and cable drama that is characteristic of privileged middle-class young-adults, her familiarity with cable crime drama is limited as she is the only privileged middle-class young-adult in this sample who does not watch any crime dramas produced by premium cable channels.

Second, privileged middle-class young-adults value textual features that deviate from network era norms. As described in chapter three, such features include serialized character development and anti-heroic protagonists. Discussing the appealing features of *White Collar*, Keri says, “*White Collar* is always pretty interesting. There are these story threads that have been built consistently through every season between the characters. It has really good character development. The relationships, especially between the two male leads has really evolved. It's neat.” Similarly, when talking about his favorite show, Brian says:

57 *Criminal Minds* distinguishes itself from other network procedural dramas by featuring protagonists that are neither police detectives nor forensic analysts. Instead, they are a team of criminal profilers working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) who travel the country assisting local police departments to identify and capture serial killers. Since its debut in 2005, the show has consistently been among the top thirty most popular programs and during its sixth season, reached the top ten with an average weekly viewership above fourteen million (Gorman 2011).

> To me, I'm always really, really clued in to seeing the character developed in a way that's interesting and not just passe. To me, the plot is usually a little bit secondary to the character development. That's why for me *Homeland*, I thought Carrie is very interesting in the way her mental state and her disorder factors in on how she's like pretty erratic lately.

He adds, “I think sometimes to me when a show gets flat is when a character becomes static. They're not changing, or your idea of them is not developing anymore.”

In addition to enjoying character development, privileged respondents also value crime dramas that include morally ambiguous protagonists. Discussing *Dexter* and the show's eponymous protagonist, Cindy, a thirty year-old graduate student in biology, says, “You have to remember it's just a TV show. It's meant to be entertaining … On TV, I don't know, there's something fun about liking the bad guy.” Jim, a twenty-three year-old graduate student, also finds Dexter to be an appealing anti-heroic protagonist. Moving between his descriptions of the character and his descriptions of the show, he says, “You got a guy who's not only a murderer, but he's compelled. They kind of go over the top of the hill a little bit because half the episode can be him mentally going, 'I need to kill this guy,' or something like that. The show is just him and his quirky little murder routine, but that hasn't stopped me from enjoying the show.”

Third, privileged middle-class young-adults distance themselves from network content and audiences. Although the distinction between network and cable drama can be made in different ways, privileged respondents often distance themselves from network crime drama by claiming that their experience with and knowledge of such shows is solely the product of circumstance. Discussing network crime dramas like *CSI* and *NCIS*, Louis, a twenty-four year-old software engineer, claims, “I only catch them tangentially because I don't, actually, have a

TV. I've seen a bunch of episodes of them just because my family watches it. Whenever I go back [home], they're always watching *CSI*." When asked what he thinks about these shows, he says, "They're all right … very clinical and episodic TV. So the characters never change. Everything stays the same and there's a new bad guy each time. It's entertaining but it's not really something that I would get addicted to watching because there's no big story line." When asked if watches network crime dramas like *CSI* and *NCIS*, Matt, a twenty-six year-old graduate student with a master's degree in history, makes a similar claim. He says, "Not really. No. My grandma watches those shows. When I'm home with her, I'll sometimes sit down and watch them with her, but I don't really go out of my way."

In addition to distancing themselves from network content, privileged respondents also distance themselves from the presumed audience of network dramas. According to Everett, a twenty-two year-old graduate student who recently began a master's program in history, "There's a lot of stuff that's just trash on network TV. Most of it. [Producers] have to appeal to the masses, [the] lowest common denominator." When asked if he every watches network sitcoms, Matt says that he does not and expresses confusion as to why anyone would. Describing *Two and a Half Men* as a rehashing of traditional sitcom tropes, he says, "It's the same low comedy. It's not very intellectual at all." Similarly, Tim, a twenty-five year-old business owner several years of experience in the financial sector, says *Two and a Half Men* is indicative of "what's wrong with [network audiences] in terms of the way they watch TV … and the things they find funny." Such comments demonstrate the extent to which the cultural legitimation of post-network television requires "a denigration of 'television' as it has long existed" as Everett invokes the "elite

conception of a mass audience too passive or stupid to watch differently" (Newman and Levine 2012, 2–3). These comments are additionally significant in light of Newman and Levine's assertion that *Two and a Half Men* epitomizes the post-network era's mass/class divide and is "widely despised by elites, whose distaste … effectively marks their social and cultural positioning" and has a "reputation among fans of Quality TV as more or less unwatchable tripe is a stark contrast against its embrace by the largest audience for comedy on television" (2012, 74).

Although the status of television has increased, in the eyes of privileged middle-class young-adults the status of many television audiences has not. Questioning the dominant narrative, Josh, a twenty-six year old graduate student with a master's degree in psychology, says, "I would say that people, Twitter feed, critics, and stuff like that, say that we're living in a golden age, and I don't really feel like that's true." He explains, "I mean, there's a lot of crap out there, but I think that there are more [producers] doing things that I'm invested in watching than ever before. But I don't feel like I watch crap ... It's not just mindlessly channel surfing. I don't think I ever do that, really." Although these respondents no longer distance themselves from television as a medium in the ways that middle-class audiences did in the multi-channel transition, nonetheless, such comments make clear that traditional middle-class ideas regarding the passivity and stupidity of television audiences do hold sway but only in regards to network content.

Although privileged middle-class young-adults understand cable crime drama in several consistent ways, their audience reception practices also vary with a given respondent's familiarity with the genre's status hierarchy. Specifically, privileged middle-class young-adults who are

viewers of both culturally legitimated and high-status cable crime dramas differ from their peers in three ways. First, their reception is characterized by the explicit appreciation of post-network television that does not cater to traditional audience needs. Despite starting to watch *The Sopranos* more than a decade after its premier, Louis, who watched the first four seasons over the course of a month, says, "I really like shows where they're not afraid to kill off the main characters. That's why I like *The Sopranos*." Similarly, Everett values textual elements of *The Wire* that limit it accessibility. He says, "It wasn't a show you could just jump into at any point. You'd be like, 'What is going on?'" Tim, for example, claims that *The Wire*'s large cast and complicated narrative allow the show to forward an important social critique. When asked to elaborate, he explains, "There's so many characters, there's so many little stories and things running through out [the show's five seasons]. I just think that the story that it tells is a really important one." A moment later he continues:

> There's a ton of people who I introduced *The Wire* to who won't even make it through the first episode, they're like, "It's just not for me." They see young black kids, they see drugs. They can't understand the dialog. They're just turned off from it. It's frustrating as hell to me. Anyone who can't watch *The Wire* and appreciate it for what it is, I basically have a hard time making friends with.

In this comment, the aesthetic judgment which values complex content becomes the grounds upon which negative judgments are made about those who lack the skills to decode such content. As such, privileged middle-class audience reception of culturally legitimated cable drama bears important similarities with highly educated European audiences and their relationships to highbrow TV comedy.

Second, privileged middle-class young-adults who are viewers of both culturally legitimated and high-status cable crime drama use discourses of legitimation that connect television to high-status cultural forms. Kate, for example, asserts, "I feel like TV is moving in the direction of short movies. Or, like miniseries type-things. That is happening more and more. That's kind of why I love television so much." Louis makes a similar claim, saying, "With [series] like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, you feel like you're watching a really long movie." In contrast with these respondents' emphasis on the cinematic qualities of cable crime drama, Tim claims these shows are literary. He says, "*Law & Order*'s a show that just doesn't have to rethink a short story, whereas *The Wire*, you know, [like] most non-network television shows, plays out like a novel and I enjoy that more." In making this claim, Tim is both aligning television with literature as highbrow culture and invoking the trope that runs throughout much critical discourse aligning *The Wire* with the work of Charles Dickens (Stanley 2008; Weisberg 2006).

Third, privileged middle-class young-adults who are viewers of both culturally legitimated and high-status cable crime drama have the ability to make additional status distinctions within the genre. Although all privileged respondents make status distinctions between network and cable, only those who have seen culturally legitimated and high-status shows make status distinctions between basic and premium cable dramas. They do so by aligning basic cable shows with devalued network television. Kate, for example, claims to dislike "most procedurals." Elaborating, she explains:

> Yeah. I don't know. I think that any drama that is too [episodic] can be OK – what is this weeks' story? But you are not progressing forward in terms of character development, or whatever else. USA, TNT shows - I mean, they can be good. I like some of them more

> than others. I watched *White Collar* for a little while. It was okay … My mom loved *The Closer*, so I watched some of it too. But I don't know, it was always, okay, what is this weeks' murder? Again, it is like the same thing over and over.

It should be noted that privileged respondents did not say anything explicitly negative about basic cable crime dramas. Rather, their couched their lack of interest in other terms. For example, when asked if he watches FX shows like *Justified* or *Sons of Anarchy*, Louis replies:

> I've seen a few episodes … I don't know, those shows are a little bit...I sense a very right wing flavor to both of those shows. I can't really explain it … I noticed that about *Sons of Anarchy* though. I guess, there's the anarchy part of it. There very about a non-state group of people. It reminded me of the militia groups, and stuff like that, that show up in America. I think there's a parallel to that, maybe. I haven't, really, seen that much of it.

Although these shows are indeed "red state shows" with narratives set in locales that provide "a glimpse of American life beyond the confines of New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago" (Shuster 2012, 1040), it seems Louis' characterization says more about him than it does about either FX show.

These respondents also make distinctions between cultural legitimated and high-status shows produced by premium cable networks. *Dexter*, for example, is seen as an absurd, albeit somewhat enjoyable, show. Kate, for example, says:

> *Dexter* is not reality. There isn't a world wherein serial killers kill thousands of people and get away with it. There's not a world in that in which that happens. So, I think that level of fantasy that is maintained within *Dexter* allows [the protagonist] to get away with more. The monologue that he has sometimes where he's talking about his reptilian brain and stuff like that … It's really retarded. [laughs]

The lack of realism in *Homeland* is similarly problematic. Everett recalls, "Season one was really

good. Season two got wacky. Just totally went off the rails I thought ... the whole plot became so wacky." He continues, "[Carrie and Brody's] whole relationship, I thought, was unrealistic. Yeah, I never bought into that. It didn't feel real to me." In addition, Everett mentions that there were so many "crazy plot developments" he has trouble remembering them. He says, "There are so many of them that was like, that could never happen. Like [Brody] killing the Vice President with a heart attack. It was some crazy thing … stealing his pacemaker number. Yeah. [laughs] It's so bombastic."

A central issue that emerges in discussions of high-status premium cable crime dramas, particularly those produced by Showtime, is the belief that such shows are overly reliant on particular characters. Regarding *Homeland*, a show he is "losing interest" in, Josh, says, "I think that it has to just get more and more ridiculous in order to keep going." As a consequence of being driven by characters rather than by a narrative into which interesting characters are placed, he believes that producers "kind of have to start running out the clock because the network wants more episodes, so even if it feels like, to the viewer, that the natural conclusion is that this character dies, it doesn't happen. It's a much bigger risk to kill off someone like that." Discussing the upcoming third season of *Homeland*, Kate says she is looking forward to it but notes having "really mixed feelings." She continues, "I've been pleasantly surprised, but I feel like they've already run the gamut with potential relationships between the various characters … That's always a gamble when it comes to these shows that are based upon a core group of people." Asked to elaborate, Kate explains, "I really like, in the second season, where they show [Carrie] having the manic episode. Through visuals. It's very serious, well-acted, well-thought out."

Nonetheless, “Moving forward, you can't just have every season be [Carrie] having manic episodes. How many times is she going to get fucking fired and rehired.” Regarding the protagonist's choice to sacrifice her job for love and run off with Brody, she adds, “That's a little lame.”

On one hand, these comments support Newman and Levine's claim that the elevated status of prime-time serial drama is constructed in opposition to the low-status and femininity of soap opera.[58] According to Newman and Levine, the most prestigious culturally legitimated post-network prime-time dramas “avoid, reject, or de-emphasize the very subject matter of soaps – that of domestic family drama and romance” (Newman and Levine 2012, 96). Regarding status, textual elements like extended relationship narratives and heightened emotional sensibility help locate the position of a given text show within post-network hierarchies. Speculatively, Newman and Levine assert the “most soapy of prime time shows, those like *Gossip Girl* and *Desperate Housewives*” might have more status than the “most debased genres of television like basic cable reality competitions” but still “suffer in reputation next to the more adult, masculine, and legitimated serial programs like *The West Wing* and *The Wire*” (2012, 98). Although the presence of narrative elements like “will-they-or-won't-they relationship plots” does not necessarily diminish the status of a show, nonetheless, “the scale of Quality TV legitimacy depends on the relative significance or intensity of focus on such feminized narrative content” and it is through such “fundamentally gendered ways of imagining and validating” television narratives that post-

58 This opposition relies on the binaries that associate serialized narratives with femininity and episodic narratives with masculinity. According to Newman and Levine (2012), the use of serialized narratives is a “problem to be managed” by television producers (92). And it is only by managing this problem that “serialized dramas are able to achieve a kind of masculinized aesthetic and economic legitimacy.”

network discourses of legitimation maintains “the feminine at the bottom of widely accepted hierarchies of value and taste” (Newman and Levine 2012, 98–99).

On the other hand, it seems equally plausible to claim that *Homeland*'s place below culturally legitimated crime dramas like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* is related to the influence of network executives on the creative process (or the perception thereof). Speaking of his character Brody, who by many accounts should not have survived the show's second season, actor Damian Lewis asserts, “I think simply for creative and artistic reasons, the writers want to kill me. There are so many compelling and devastating story lines that would just be great TV and theater. The more compromised storytelling is to keep him alive and to keep him bubbling along somehow. It's the executives who write that version” (Rodrick 2013). The controversy surrounding the finale of *Dexter*, in which the protagonist fakes his own death, abandons his girlfriend and son, and runs off to become a lumberjack, supports such an interpretation. According to one of the show's producers, the finale was the result of interference from network executives:

> They [wouldn't] let us kill [the protagonist]. Showtime was very clear about that. When we told them the arc for the last season, they just said, “Just to be clear, he’s going to live.” There were a lot of endings discussed because it was a very interesting problem to solve, to bring it to a close. People have a relationship with *Dexter*, even if it doesn’t have the size and the ferocity of the fanbase for *Breaking Bad*. But it has a very core loyal following. (Stedman 2013)

In contrast with Showtime's reputation for allowing executives to meddle with the creative process, HBO has positioned itself as a bastion of artistic freedom (Santo 2008; Anderson 2008). Although *Homeland*'s status might very well suffer from a more feminized narrative, there are

also indications that it suffers by virtue of its network's inferior position relative to that of HBO.[59]

More broadly, Kate's characterization of *Homeland* as “a little lame” reflects the distinctions privileged middle-class young-adults make between culturally legitimated and high-status crime dramas. Much like the way in which these viewers distance themselves from basic cable dramas without saying such shows are beneath them, the discourse of distinction surrounding high-status crime dramas relies upon assertions that shows like *Dexter*, *Homeland*, *Boardwalk Empire* are acceptable, but not great. Discussing *Boardwalk Empire*, Kate explains:

> Yeah, I don't know, I think it was a little bit … I mean, it was alright. It's not *The Wire* but I think that Nucky is a good character, great actor, funny-looking guy. I didn't like his Irish girlfriend that much. I don't know, she was kind of whiny. I didn't quite know what to think of the weird inner section with reality … I don't know how much of it is supposed to be based upon the Atlantic City story … I like my fiction in fiction. [laughs] The second it kind of intersects with [historical] reality, I'm not a huge fan of it … playing around with what actually happened.

Asked if she thinks shows should strive to be either realistic/historically accurate or entirely fictive, Kate replies, “Exactly.” Tim offers a different mixed assessment of *Boardwalk Empire* saying, “I kind of like it.” Acknowledging the show's positive features, he says, “I think it's

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59 Regarding the conclusion of popular series, the contrast between HBO and Showtime is particularly stark. In the controversial finale of *The Sopranos*, rather than go out on a high note by allowing Tony to escape his enemies or the government one more time, or finish as a morality tale by punishing Tony's sins in one way or another, the series simply cuts to black without providing any narrative resolution. Explaining viewers' responses to the episode, David Chase says, “To me the question is not whether Tony lived or died, and that's all that people wanted to know: 'Well, did he live or did he die? You didn't finish the show. You didn't answer the question.' That's preposterous. There was something else I was saying that was more important than whether Tony Soprano lived or died” (Coyle 2012). He adds, “All I wanted to do was present the idea of how short life is and how precious it is. The only way I felt I could do that was to rip it away. And I think people did get it. It made them upset emotionally, but intellectually they didn't follow it.” It is this lack of respect for the audience that separates HBO. In contrast, Showtime executives want the audience to leave a series feeling good even if that means concocting absurd twists where protagonists fake their own deaths.

difficult to pull off any kind of television show that's going to string out over the course of multiple seasons. It's set in another time period. That's really neat. I think Nucky's a great character." Yet, he continues, "I don't know if I have a strong opinion. It's kind of one of those things where I just sit back and enjoy it, I don't want to say I'm just passively taking in … like I'm thinking about what's going on, but it's just not … it doesn't seem as … The messages don't seem as relatable as something like *The Wire*." This hesitance to characterize engagement with Boardwalk Empire as "passive," clearly a pejorative term in the context of the post-network era television, points to the limitations of understanding cultural legitimation as a binary. After a moment of reflection, Tim adds, "But I like it. I think it's well shot. I think the costumes are great. I think the whole concept is neat. You can tell they spent a ton of money on it." Although legitimating discourse "implicitly characterizes the television of the present in terms that associate it with the more powerful sides of a number of unequal cultural binaries" (Newman and Levine 2012, 37), cumulatively, the three types of status distinctions privileged middle-class young-adults make regarding cable crime drama reveals a more complex status hierarchy.

Non-Privileged Middle-Class Young-Adults

The audience reception practices associated with cable crime drama among middle-class young-adults without post-graduate education or a high-status occupation have three important elements. First, these viewers are primarily oriented toward textual features like narrative structure and the appeal of specific characters. Charles, an eighteen year-old college student, for example, explains the particular pleasures of *Burn Notice* in terms of the "cases" that drive the

Table 4.2: Non-Privileged Middle-Class Young-Adult Viewers of Cable Crime Drama

	Name, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity	Education	Occupation	Culturally Legitimated	High-Status
1	Aaron, 27, M, white	HS*	musician	*Sopranos*	*Boardwalk, Dexter*
2	Adrian, 27, M, white	BA	server	-----	*Closer, White Collar*
3	Amy, 22, F, Asian	BA	grant admin.	-----	*Dexter*
4	Becca, 22, F, Af.-Amer.	BA	researcher	-----	*Rizzoli & Isles*
5	Beth, 22, F, white	BA	researcher	*Sopranos, Wire*	*Dexter*
6	Charles, 18, M, white	HS*	student	-----	*Dexter*
7	Corey, 27, M, white	HS*	tailor	*Sopranos, Wire*	----
8	Deb, 20, F, Af.-Amer.	HS*	student	-----	*Boardwalk*
9	Erik, 21, M, white	HS*	student	*Wire*	----
10	Gina, 18, F, white	HS*	student	-----	*Dexter*
11	Kendall, 28, F, white	HS*	paralegal	-----	*Closer*
12	Mary, 22, F, Hispanic	HS*	student	-----	*Boardwalk, Homeland, Dexter*
13	Rick, 26, M, white	BA	HR specialist	*Sopranos, Wire*	*Boardwalk, Burn Notice, Dexter, White Collar*
14	Rob, 20, M, Asian	HS*	student	*Wire*	----
15	Sage, 19, F, Hispanic	HS*	student	-----	*White Collar, Burn Notice*
16	Sam, 22, M, Asian	HS*	student	*Wire*	----
17	Wes, 19, M , white	HS*	student	-----	*Dexter*
18	Zoe, 22, F, Hispanic	HS*	student	-----	*Dexter*

*some college

narrative in a given episode. He says, “That's more for the cases … The character drama is a nice bonus, but for me that one's more the cases.” Zoe, a twenty-two year-old student, similarly asserts, “In *NCIS*, *Cold Case*, and *Criminal Minds*, I like the individual episode type of arcs. The main [serialized] arcs, I don't really pay attention to those. If [characters] start talking about their personal lives I zone out.” This is not to say that these viewers are uninterested in serialized narrative content. Sage, a nineteen year-old student, notes, “In *White Collar* there's usually, in every season, a crime throughout every episode some reference to it or some kidnapping extortion scheme, or there's the risk of the main character being pulled back into the crime world or something like that.”

Yet, the appreciation of episodic narratives blends almost seamlessly into discussions of individual characters or the relationships between characters. Becca, a twenty-two year old recent college graduate who is currently working as a medical researcher, also addresses the appeal of *Rizzoli & Isles* in terms of the central characters. She explains, “They solve crimes and often times, each episode has some kind of personal issues or conflicts that they're going through as well. That's what it is, pretty much.” When asked to elaborate, Becca continues:

> I just like the characters and how they're so different from each other. They juxtapose each other and they work really well. How the detective has issues with her family, and there's that whole dynamic that she has with them – her brother, and her mom at the same time. That always was interesting, and that's the reason why I watched it last summer.

Although these comments lack the emphasis on family relationships that is characteristic of middle-class women viewers in the network era, the emphasis on the likability of characters nonetheless resembles a similar form of “personal relatedness” (Press 1991, 86). Indeed, feelings

about a given show are directly linked to their attitudes regarding particular characters. Discussing her favorite show, *Law & Order: SVU*, Amy, a twenty-two year-old grant administrator, says, "I really like the characters. I love Olivia, B.D. Wong." Similarly, Deb, a twenty year-old student who recently transferred to a four year university from a community college, claims, "I watched *SVU* before they took Stabler off and it's not the same now so I just stopped watching it." Deb is referring to the departure of Elliot Stabler, the detective played by the actor Christopher Meloni (Carter 2011). Meloni could not reach an agreement with NBC executives regarding a new contract. In this case, the appeal of a particular crime drama is entirely dependent upon the a middle-class viewer's feelings about a singular character.

Second, non-privileged middle-class young-adults are not particularly concerned with status. Many do not make status distinctions between network and cable drama. Asked if she enjoys any crime dramas other than *Rizzoli & Isles*, Becca replies, "No, I don't think so. I guess I'm more [an] ABC, CBS, NBC kind [of viewer], because growing up, I didn't have cable." Some respondents even prefer the network dramas above cable dramas. When asked if *White Collar* is her favorite, Sage replies, "No, it's not my favorite. I did like it a lot for a while." Although it took her a moment to choose, she continues, "In the crime drama genre, I really like *Bones* [FOX, 2005-]. I really like *Bones*, because it is set in DC, which is awesome and has FBI agents and stuff." Of the show's male and female leads, Sage says, "I like Bones [Emily Deschanel] and Booth [David Boreanaz]. I feel like they're kind of a funny awkward couple." Although many non-privileged middle-class young-adults do not make status distinctions between network and cable drama, some nonetheless denigrate network drama. Rob, a twenty year-old college junior,

for example, finds fault with the unrealistic elements in network dramas. Discussing *SVU*, he says:

> I've only seen glimpses of it, but my impression is it fetishizes weird-ass crimes. Like, "Oh, look! This girl was raped in front of everybody, and no one stopped it." I guess it's tragic, but they play it up a lot. I don't know. I like it, but at the same time I'm aware of the fact that they are inventing all these crazy stories.

Regarding *CSI*, which he claims to have seen less frequently than *SVU*, he continues, "From what I've seen of it is...I think I saw *CSI: Miami*, the one with David Caruso with the sun glasses. Yeah. It looks ridiculous. I didn't like it. I looks completely removed from reality, and they just try to glamorize what seems to be mundane work." Yet, having only seen a single cable crime drama, Rob does not make an explicit status comparison. In fact, only one non-privileged middle-class young-adults offers an explicit status comparison. Comparing *The Wire* to network drama, Erik, a twenty-two year-old college student, says:

> If I'm at home, I'll just watch it if it's on TV, but I wouldn't really identify as a *CSI* watcher … Honestly, it's almost to the point where you just can't compare them. You watch them for very different reasons. You watch *CSI* because you just want to be entertained for an hour and see some sort of sexy case with, you know, something about a rapist or a murderer or double homicide, I don't know.

In claiming one cannot compare *CSI* and *The Wire*, it seems Erik makes a valient effort to avoid denigrating the former to celebrate the latter.

Furthermore, these respondents are unconcerned with the status of particular cable crime dramas. After stating that the historical elements of *Boardwalk Empire* initially drew her to the show, I asked Deb if she thought the show was historically accurate. She replies, "I can't really

say because I don't really know what really happened. So … I think it's probably getting off course. I wouldn't be surprised. It's such a big show. I wouldn't be surprised if the writer kind of tweak some things." When asked to explain what she means by "big show," she continues, "Well, I guess it is critically acclaimed at this point. That's kind of what I mean by 'big show,' like that. I don't know if it's popular with people that much. My friends don't really watch it." Yet, when asked if critical acclaim was important to her, Deb replies, "Not really, as long as I like it. I don't really care about [critical acclaim]." This comment and the underlying cultural orientation are quite similar to John's assertion in chapter three, "I like what I like and if I don't like it, I don't watch it." Zoe expresses similar ambivalence regarding *Dexter*. Knowing the show is often thought to be a rather uneven series, I ask if she had a favorite season. Zoe responds, "I think I liked season one the best because it dealt with [Dexter's] brother and then [Dexter] trying to do it himself. I didn't really like season two. I didn't like that one at all – dealing with a random person in his life and then out of his life." Regarding later seasons, she continues, "[The show] killed off [Dexter's wife] Rita, and then sent the other two [late-season girlfriends] away. I liked them interact[ing with Dexter]. I wanted them to interact a little more." When asked if the later seasons reduced the show's standing in her eyes, Zoe seems to reject the premise of the question replying, "I don't know. It's just something to watch."

Third, these middle-class respondents acknowledge that their engagement with premium cable crime drama is distinct from their other television viewing practices. For example, Gina, an eighteen year-old full-time college student, notes that *Dexter* requires greater focus than other crime dramas. She says, "I'm not like the type that just jumps around episodes, I do like that. But

then I also have to pay attention a little bit more with *Dexter*, as opposed to if I miss, if I start to fall asleep, because I usually watch this at night, if I start to fall asleep during an episode of *Criminal Minds* I won't miss that much. It won't be that bad if I miss it." Explaining his interest in *The Wire*, Erik, a twenty-two year-old student, says, "What I thought was really interesting was that I know that a lot of fairly important and high profile politicians have claimed *The Wire* as one of their favorite or most influential TV shows." He adds:

> This is really the only TV show where I just watched it all the way through in just a fairly short amount of time. Yeah. Honestly, it's very strange for me, because I don't even like watching that much TV, ever. I don't even own a TV at school, because none of the people in my house watch TV. I never get this invested in a TV show, but it's very anomalous for me.

In addition to the assertion that *The Wire* is exceptional television, Erik asserts that his own behavior in relation to *The Wire* is exceptional. Specifically, he claims that watching culturally legitimated cable drama is a purposeful engagement that reflects an uncommon level of investment. Using a similar framework, Amy claims that *Dexter* is "one of the only shows that I've watched sequentially." She explains, "That's one of the only shows I do that to. It's so weird. I don't watch much TV. When I do it's *SVU* or *Criminal Minds*." In these comments, it seems that notions of television as a bad cultural object remain just beneath the surface.

Although middle-class young-adults understand watching crime drama as distinct from their typical patterns of television viewing, they largely understand anti-heroic protagonists as one might understand more traditional television protagonists. Specifically, it seems that a given anti-hero's behavior is not a source of moral conflict. Deb's comments regarding *Boardwalk Empire*'s second season finale ("To the Lost") are instructive. After beating a murder case against

him, Nucky Thompson, the show's protagonist, ends the season long conflict with his protege Jimmy Darmody with another murder. As retribution for betrayal, Thompson shoots Darmody in the face on a secluded Atlantic City beach. The scene ends with Thompson proclaiming, as he stands over Darmody's dying body, “I am not seeking forgiveness,” before firing another bullet as a coup de grace. As many critics note, this episode is loaded with moral implications (Sepinwall 2011; Beard 2011). Writing for the *A.V. Club*, for example, Murray (2011) notes that Thompson “finds himself … with the ability to be any kind of boss he wants to be, and to control both who stays employed and what they ultimately think of him.” Summing up the character's morality throughout the series, he continues:

> At one point in this episode, Nucky scoffs at the charges against him, saying to his lawyer, 'How do you order someone to commit murder? Fuckin’ ludicrous.' And I think he’s really believed this on some level for all these years, that he’s just facilitated the circumstances by which people die and make his life easier, and that he hasn’t done anything wrong himself. Now, though, he knows what he is. (N. Murray 2011)

Yet, Deb has little to say about it, “I was very surprised. I didn't even know how they were going to carry on the show without [Darmody]. It was a pretty good season finale, I thought. It was very surprising.” Responses to several follow-up questions indicate that this is all Deb has to say about the matter.

The absence of conflicted moral allegiance is most pronounced among *Dexter* viewers. Despite committing more than eighty murders over the course of the show's first five seasons, Dexter is “clearly framed as a protagonist toward whom we [the audience] feel sympathy and allegiance” (Mittell 2013, chap. Character). Yet, the character undergoes very little development

over the course of the series. As Mittell observes, "*Dexter*'s concept is predicated on his character posing behind a stable facade to all of his long-term friends and family, so they cannot have sincere relationships with him compared with what we know of him as aligned viewers" (2013, chap. Character). The middle-class *Dexter* viewers included in this research, however, offer radically different readings. Rather than seeing Dexter as a sociopath incapable of emotional growth, Amy asserts that the character changes over the course of the series. Discussing the show's upcoming eighth and final season, she says:

> I only see a couple ways it's going to end. [Dexter] could get caught, or he could just live his life, continue doing what he does. Or his character can change. I just don't see any other outcomes. I'm surprised that they've carried it out this far, but I don't know. I think they've just built up the character so much. He has changed throughout the seasons that I think that is why people keep watching it.[60]

Similarly, Wes, a nineteen year-old full-time undergraduate, claims, "As the show progresses, [Dexter] turns good and realizes that he is a good person. He still feels regret that there's still this monster, this passenger inside him." And like Deb's understanding of *Boardwalk Empire*'s protagonist, it seems Wes does not struggle with Dexter's moral standing. In fact, he understands the character in rather unambiguous terms that are entirely in line with the relative notions of morality forwarded by the show itself. Wes asserts "I think [Dexter] does more good than bad, because he has his own sense of justice … I think that he is in between being a serial killer and a vigilante. That he doesn't really know, it's like he's a thin line between the two always. I still think he is kind of leaning towards the vigilante side." Indeed, Dexter characterizes his own behavior as killing "bad" people to make the world "better."

60 The series finale of *Dexter* has been widely disparaged (Rys 2013; Day-Preston 2013).

Only one respondent expresses conflicted moral allegiance about *Dexter*. Beth, a twenty-two year-old research assistant, asserts that the show's premise becomes less tenable in later seasons. She says:

> I don't know how much of a sociopath you have to be to be labeled a sociopath, but the idea that he just has no emotions and can't form attachments to people, I think it pretty much breaks down more and more as the show progresses. Because he's going to kill this girl [Hannah] in season seven, and he has her on his [killing] table, and he's about to kill her. And he has sex with her instead and then lets her go. Then they start dating.

Having seen culturally legitimated and high-status cable crime dramas, Beth is able to connect this understand to the genre's status hierarchy. She continues, "*Dexter* is funny and entertaining, but I wouldn't say it's a good show in the way *The Wire* is a good show … It's not a realistic show." Yet, among the few middle-class young-adults who are viewers of both culturally legitimated and high-status cable crime dramas (rather than one or the other), Beth is the only respondent to make this status distinction. This supports Kuipers (2006b) claims that the performance of distinction requires a great deal of familiarity. In contrast, Aaron, a twenty-seven year-old musician, dislikes *Dexter* but does not raise issues related to status. Describing his experience watching the first two seasons, he says, "I stuck through it and watched it. It got a little redundant. 'I'm Dexter. I don't feel anything. I don't understand.' Over and over and over and over, and kind of like same beat, same note. I got tired of it, I guess." This inability to form a referential relationship with a particular text is similar to the claims of boredom made by non-privileged respondents in chapter two.

Another significant observation about non-privileged middle-class young-adult cable

crime drama viewers is the significance of access, or lack thereof. Given the costs of cable television and various streaming services, it is reasonable to expect middle-class young-adults with fewer economic resources to report that accessing desired television content presents a problem. Yet, among the viewers in this sample, that does not seem to be the case. In fact, only one non-privileged respondent raises issues of access during their interview. Discussing her lack of interest in HBO or Showtime content, Becca, a twenty-two year-old recent college graduate, says, “I try to stay away from [premium cable content] just because I know my parents would never subscribe to that at home. If I would go home, I wouldn't have that access to watch, so why start watching something when you really don't have access to it?” When asked to elaborate, she continues, “One of my friends, she was trying to get me to watch something on HBO. She was like, 'You should watch this.' I couldn't watch it on TV, so I tried to look for it online. It was just so hard to find. Other shows or channels, you'd be able to find like ABC, you would find it within an hour online.” Yet, rather than understanding Becca's difficulty in finding HBO content as a structural barrier preventing access, it seems more likely that Becca lacks the digital skills needed to find such content safely. For example, the season four finale of HBO's fantasy drama *Game of Thrones* is the most pirated show in history (McGregor 2014). For those unable to navigate torrent search engines or distinguish trustworthy sources from untrustworthy sources, accessing such content is perhaps more trouble than its worth.

In this instance, television overlaps with other forms of “new media.” The ability to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by digital convergence requires an individual to access content and activate cultural competencies. In her research, Hargittai, with others, finds that the

tendency to accumulate cultural capital online is related to socioeconomic status (Zillien and Hargittai 2009; Hargittai and Hinnant 2008). In addition to research showing that capital-enhancing internet activities are deployed primarily by higher status groups, recently media studies scholars have observed that cultural capital is also activated through participation with social networking websites (boyd 2015; Watkins 2010). As Seiter (2007) notes in an ethnographic study of children and the internet, closing the technology gap is an "easier task to address than the wider and deeper deprivations" in society at large (101). Even if access is unconstrained by economic concerns, audience reception of post-network programming, as Becca's discussion of access illustrates, varies because the availability of the cultural competencies needed to interact with new media are related to socioeconomic status.

Middle-Class Audiences and Breaking Bad

As mentioned in chapter three, this research did not explicitly recruit young-adult viewers of *Breaking Bad*. Yet, as it happens, more than half (sixteen) of the respondents addressed in this chapter are viewers of the show. Of these sixteen respondents, nine are privileged (Brian, Cindy, Jamie, Jim, Josh, Louis, Matt, Steve and Tim) and seven are not (Aaron, Amy, Beth, Gina, Mary, Rick, and Wes). At the time of the interviews, the show was seemingly inescapable. In the early portion of the show's five season run which began in 2008, *Breaking Bad* was largely a cult success (Deadline Team 2013). Walter White, the show's protagonist, begins the series as a mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher.[61] After being diagnosed with cancer, he begins

61 The character's "everyman" identity is further supported by the actor chosen to play White. Prior to *Breaking Bad*, Bryan Cranston was most familiar to television audiences for his role as Hal, the father in the family sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*.

producing and dealing methamphetamine ("crystal meth") to ensure his family's financial security after his death. The show is primarily concerned with White's transformation from everyman to criminal mastermind. *Breaking Bad* showrunner Vince Gilligan describes the protagonist's character development as "a story that takes Mr. Chips and turns him into Scarface."[62] Although *The Sopranos* demonstrated that audiences are willing to stick with anti-heroic protagonists despite morally reprehensible behavior, Tony undergoes little moral development over the course of the series. If anything, he doesn't change at all. In contrast, *Breaking Bad*'s audience watches White become a sociopath. For example, in season one, it takes White several days to build up the courage to kill Krazy-8, a drug dealer imprisoned by White and his partner, Jesse Pinkman (S01E02). By the conclusion of the second season, White coldly watches Pinkman's girlfriend Jane drown in her own vomit following a drug overdose (S02E12).

Although the show's anti-heroic protagonist is the focal point of the show and its audience, a considerable amount of attention was also given to White's wife, Skyler. Much of this attention, however, was negative. As Anna Gunn, the actress who plays Skyler, wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece during the show's fifth and final season, audience antipathy towards the wet-blanket wife of a beloved protagonist resulted in outright misogyny. Describing the internet vitriol directed at her character, Gunn (2013) reports, "A typical online post complained that Skyler was a 'shrieking, hypocritical harpy' and didn't 'deserve the great life she has.' 'I have never hated a TV-show character as much as I hate her,' one poster wrote. The consensus among

62 "Mr. Chips" is a reference to Mr. Chipping, a beloved school teacher, who is the protagonist in the novella *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* which was adapted for both film and television. "Scarface" is a reference to either the 1932 movie inspired by the life of Al Capone or the 1983 film remake of the same name in which Capone is replaced by a Cuban immigrant turned drug dealer named Tony Montana.

the haters was clear: Skyler was a ball-and-chain, a drag, a shrew, an 'annoying bitch wife.'" Ultimately, Gunn (2013) concludes that "most people's hatred of Skyler had little to do with me and a lot to do with their own perception of women and wives. Because Skyler didn't conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female, she had become a kind of Rorschach test for society, a measure of our attitudes toward gender."

At the show's conclusion in 2013, in part due to accessibility via Netflix, the show's audience had grown substantially. As such, addressing middle-class young-adults understandings of *Breaking Bad* is useful for multiple reasons. Unlike the two other culturally legitimated crime dramas which are produced by the premium cable network HBO, *Breaking Bad* is produced by the basic cable network AMC. In addition, respondents were watching the show as the interviews were being conducted. Furthermore, *Breaking Bad* provides the greatest overlap between privileged and not privileged middle-class young-adults. As with the other cable crime dramas addressed in this chapter, the findings reflect that the reception of *Breaking Bad* as a post-network text and viewer's understandings of the show's protagonist vary with social location.

Privileged respondents understand the show in the broader context of post-network television. Tim, for example, explicitly compares *Breaking Bad* to another culturally legitimated drama. He says, "I think it's just as entertaining as *The Wire*, it keeps you on as edge just as much *The Wire*, but it's not going to have, for me at least, the long lasting social impact. It's not going to challenge long held beliefs that I've had." When asked to elaborate, Tim continues, "You're basically wrestling with the plight of one character. It's great, It's a lot like *The Sopranos*. One person is carrying it and a lot of how you feel about the show rests solely on how you feel about that character's evolution." Rather than addressing *Breaking Bad* in reference to other culturally

legitimated shows, Louis sees the show as situated in a specific post-network context. He says, "I really like *Breaking Bad*. I guess because it is able to make these really awful scenes and somehow actually put them on everyday cable. That's really interesting to me. It's a very intense show, and that's why people get hooked on it." He also invokes legitimating discourses noting, "There's also a lot of literary things that are going on in *Breaking Bad*. There's references to Walt Whitman, but there's something really Kafkaesque about it. There's something also kind of Samuel Beckett about it, especially the episode with the fly." In Louis' comments, audience reception comes to resemble what Khan (2012) describes as the "ease of privilege." In his analysis of an elite prep school, Khan finds that traditional patterns of cultural consumption among elites have been replaced as students "are taught to move with ease through the broad range of culture, to move with felicity from the elite to the popular" (161). Incorporating Kafka, Whitman, and Beckett into his thoughts about *Breaking Bad*, Louis succeeds at doing just that.

Beyond the ability to move between popular and elite culture, Louis' feelings about "the episode with the fly" touch on other relevant issues. After listing the litany of literary references quoted above, Louis adds, "The episode with the fly could be a play. I really like that episode." The positive attitude toward this specific episode is notable. "Fly" (S10E03) takes place almost entirely within the confines of a meth lab concealed beneath an industrial laundry facility. In a narrative sense, the episode details the process by which White and Pinkman catch and kill a housefly. This particular episode resulted from *Breaking Bad*'s budgetary restrictions. According to Gilligan, "We were hopelessly over budget … And we needed to come up with what is called a bottle episode, set in one location" (Vineyard 2013).[63] The episode is often described as one of

63 The episode saved $25,000-35,000 which was the sum required to move production trucks to a new

the show's most polarizing. It has been widely praised by critics for its cinematography and directing, and for the dynamic between White and Pinkman. Sepinwall (2010), for example, speculated that “Fly” may be “the best bottle show ever” characterizing the episode as “an instant classic.” Zoller Seitz thought it was the greatest episode of the entire series, calling it a “perfect *Breaking Bad* episode and a perfect hour of television.” Among many fans, however, the lack of plot development and heavy-handed symbolism result in declarations of “worst episode ever.”[64] In this context, Louis' positive feelings about this episode once again indicate a degree of alignment between privileged middle-class audiences and cultural elites like television critics.

Unlike privileged middle-class young-adults like Tim and Louis, less privileged respondents understand *Breaking Bad* as a singular text isolated from television as a medium. Jeremy, for example, says, “If I step back and think about what the actual plot line of *Breaking Bad* it's so insane. [laughs] Somebody once described it as a 'high stakes thriller' and that's the level I watch it on. I'm not too interested in the characters or discussions of morality, or family

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location (Sepinwall 2010).

64 The phrase “worst episode ever” is a reference to fans' hyperbolic responses to content they find disappointing which are often expressed online. The phrase itself is a reference to *The Simpsons*. In the episode “The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show” (S08E14), Homer provides the voice for Poochie, a new character on *The Simpsons*' cartoon within a cartoon “Itchy & Scratchy.” The response to the new character was largely negative and lead to the following exchange between Comic Book Guy (CBG) and Bart:

> CBG: Last night's Itchy & Scratchy was, without a doubt, the worst episode ever. Rest assured that I was on internet within minutes registering my disgust throughout the world.
> Bart: Hey, I know it wasn't great, but what right do you have to complain?
> CBG: As a loyal viewer, I feel they owe me.
> Bart: What? They've given you thousands of hours of entertainment for free. What could they possibly owe you? I mean, if anything, you owe them.
> CBG: Worst episode ever.

This exchange is a meta-commentary on the relationship between fans and cultural producers in the context of convergence culture.

stuff. It's more just the thrill ride of it I like.” Similarly, when asked what he likes about the show, Aaron simple says, “It's fun, it's real fun.” Among television critics, this type of appreciation is associated with the label of the “bad fan.” Coined by *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum (2013) in response to audience attitudes towards the final season of *Breaking Bad*, she claims, “All shows have them. They’re the *Sopranos* buffs who wanted a show made up of nothing but whackings (and who posted eagerly about how they fast-forwarded past anything else).” Nussbaum goes on to assert that, “some fans are watching wrong.” In a later piece, she explains that, “This sort of audience divide, not between those who love a show and those who hate it but between those who love it in very different ways, has become a familiar schism in the past fifteen years” (Nussbaum 2014). She continues:

> This is particularly true of the much lauded stream of cable “dark dramas,” whose protagonists shimmer between the repulsive and the magnetic. As anyone who has ever read the comments on a recap can tell you, there has always been a less ambivalent way of regarding an antihero: as a hero. Some of the most passionate fans of *The Sopranos* fast-forwarded through Carmela and Dr. Melfi to freeze-frame Tony strangling a snitch with electrical wire. (David Chase satirized their bloodlust with a plot about “Cleaver,” a mob horror movie with all of the whackings, none of the Freud.) More recently, a subset of viewers cheered for Walter White on *Breaking Bad*, growling threats at anyone who nagged him to stop selling meth.

Yet, there is little doubt that the “bad fan” label has class connotations.

In fact, Nussbaum argues that the emergence of the “bad fan” can be traced back to *All in the Family*'s (CBS, 1971-1979) racist, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, and homophobic working-class buffoon and stereotypical head of the sitcom household Archie Bunker. Bunker is particularly relevant for discussions of the anti-hero in TV's third golden age because *All in the Family*'s

creator Norman Lear has famously claimed that the character was supposed to be hated by audiences who were believed to be increasingly socially liberal. Yet, as one sitcom historian observes, audiences liked Bunker but, "Not in an ironic way, not in a so-racist-he's-funny way; Archie was TV royalty because fans saw him as one of their own" (Austerlitz 2014, 114). Furthermore, at the conclusion of the article, Nussbaum invokes the binary between active and passive viewing before lauding shows that encourage active engagement, "There's a lot to be said for a show that is potent without being perfect, or maybe simply perfect for its moment: storytelling that alters the audience by demanding that viewers do more than just watch."

Referencing Nussbaum's position, Zoller Seitz (2013), an equally highbrow critic who writes for *New York Magazine*'s online shingle *Vulture*, writes:

> If you seek to deny or minimize the parts of art that don't fit your reductive interpretation of Walt as a basically decent man, or a man who moves with a purpose and is somehow "badass," as opposed to the complex monster the show has actually presented over five seasons, you are in fact, as Nussbaum wrote in her piece on the scene, watching the show wrong. In fact, you're trying to turn a smart show into a stupid one. And you really should ask yourself why.

This comment contains both the legitimating discourses associated with post-network television ("art") as well as more traditional archetypes of class-based distinction including assumptions regarding the "bad" fan's lack of intellectual capabilities ("reductive interpretation") and admiration of machismo ("'badass'"). In addition, Zoller Seitz accuses such audience members of perverting a celebrated text ("you're trying to turn a smart show into a stupid one") and exhorts them to engage in a bout of self-reflexive assessment ("you really should ask yourself why") which is itself class-specific behavior. Among the respondents interviewed for this research, none

seemed to qualify as a "bad fan." However, understandings of *Breaking Bad*'s protagonist do vary with class status.

Privileged middle-class young-adults offer characterizations similar to Zoller Seitz's "complex monster." Brian, for example, claims that over the course of the series, White "was slowly admitting that [his criminal activity] wasn't for his family. It was for [himself]. [He] loved it and [he] was so happy. I feel like you [as the viewer] feel the tension. He was finally being happy and finally 'breaking bad' and living freely, but he also lost his life and destroyed his family." As Brian notes here, *Breaking Bad*'s narrative ends with the death of its protagonist.[65] The series' final scene, White collapses with a fatal gunshot wound in a super-lab he helped build with a look of satisfaction on his face as federal agents storm the building (S05E16). Although he succeeded in providing financial security for his family, by the conclusion of the series he is estranged from them. In fact, Brian understands the show through this framework. He says, "That's how the whole show is torn. The whole show is torn by him discovering himself and also destroying other people's lives. I thought it was awesome and fun to watch the ending." Josh offers a similar interpretation. He understands *Breaking Bad* to be a show that has "been turning the hero into the villain." He explains, "It's really a test to see how long you going to stay with this guy you've kind of been complacently conditioned to always root for, no matter what." Here, Josh offers a critical interpretation reflecting awareness of the semantic elements of the show (Liebes and Katz 1990, 117) as his comments include inferences regarding *Breaking Bad*'s thematic elements and the intentions of the show's creators.

In contrast, middle-class young-adults interpret White in unilateral terms. Wes, for

65 In contrast, *The Sopranos* provides no such narrative closure.

example, finds “a basically decent man” saying,“I really like the fact that Walter White stands up for his family, and is doing anything for his family. I just admire that characteristic of Walter. He's stubborn to help his family, even though he has cancer.” This celebration of a protagonist's commitment to family resembles the understanding of heroes within “lower-middle culture” who typically accept the validity of traditional institutions (Gans 199, 111). Yet, in this instance, to embrace White for his loyalty to his family requires that one ignores the damage the character brings to other families. In line with referential reception, Mary offers an opposing but equally unilateral reading. She says, “Every decision that Walter, especially, makes is something I wouldn't do or couldn't imagine myself doing. I don't really think that people deserve to die in general, but if there is anyone that deserves to die, it probably could be him.” Quite clearly, Mary relates to White as a real person and in turn relates this real person to her own real world (Liebes and Katz 1990, 100). Taken together, non-privileged middle-class young-adults readings of *Breaking Bad* do not exalt White the “badass.” Nonetheless, they are not nuanced takes on a “complex monster” either.

These differing understandings of *Breaking Bad* and Walter White highlight that audience reception varies with status within middle-class audiences. Yet, the way in which audience reception of *Breaking Bad* expands the understanding of the ways in which middle-class viewers navigate post-network television's status hierarchies is less clear. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is appropriate to include a basic cable crime drama among the culturally legitimated as *Breaking Bad* is so often mentioned in the same sentence as *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. As such, this research attempts to deal with the complexity of the contemporary post-network

landscape rather than avoid it. Still, there is a measure of uncertainty regarding *Breaking Bad*'s status. Specifically, there are reasons to wonder if the show will still be atop the status hierarchy of cable crime dramas five or ten years from now. Summing up the relevant issues, an astute critic writes:

> As underwhelming as many of the individual components of *Breaking Bad* are, the more central problem is that all of its essential concepts and themes have been done before… frequently better, and not that long ago. The similarities between *Breaking Bad*'s premise and those of both *Weeds* and *The Sopranos* are obvious. Yet while many observers have noted those similarities (as well as connections to *The Shield* and *The Wire*), few have considered the extent to which they render *Breaking Bad* redundant … To my mind, if history is just, it will judge *Breaking Bad* differently: as a show that reconstituted other, finer series' spare parts with middling success, and as more of a footnote to an exciting movement than a centerpiece of it. (Bowie 2013)

Although these issues say little about how contemporary middle-class viewers understand *Breaking Bad*, it is possible the show's changing status will impact the ways in which the relationship between middle-class audiences and post-network status hierarchies are understood.

Discussion:

These findings support the arguments made in chapter two regarding middle-class viewers. Like the reception practices associated with post-network era television more broadly, the relationship between the young adults in this sample and cable crime drama reflects variation within middle-class audiences. Greater access to discourses of legitimation allow privileged respondents to more fully embrace cable crime drama. Yet, the data in this chapter also expands upon the more general findings in chapter two regarding the cultural status of post-network

television.

Although dominant narratives associated with the “third golden age” proclaim that the quality of American television improved as the result of a “creative revolution” (Sepinwall 2012), it is certainly more accurate to claim that television's status has bifurcated. Describing the first decade of the post-network era, one critic writes, “As the sixties are to music and the seventies to movies, the aughts—which produced the best and worst shows in history—were to TV” (Nussbaum 2009). Unlike the privileged middle-class young-adults in chapter two who embraced post-network television as a medium including “culturally degraded” (Newman and Levine 2012, 126) content like reality TV, the findings presented above include similarly privileged viewers embracing television in a much more selective fashion. Often such selection occurred along the lines of the status hierarchy laid out in chapter three. Specifically, privileged respondents do not embrace network procedurals, the most culturally degraded content in the genre of crime drama.

By narrowing the scope of the analysis to a specific type of television show (crime drama) that is produced in a specific economic context (cable rather than broadcast), the findings described above reveal the degree to which “good” TV taste requires a breadth of cultural knowledge. Although privileged respondents engage with crime dramas from multiple portions of the genre's status hierarchy, the preference for complexity, complicated narratives and morally ambiguous protagonists, is marked. Their familiarity with and desire to distance themselves from network crime drama is equally pronounced. As such, there is little reasons to believe that consuming a broad range of TV crime drama signifies the decline of cultural snobbery.[66]

66 While there is little doubt that some high status individuals at some point in the past began consuming

Furthermore, the distinctions privileged middle-class viewers make with regards to culturally legitimated and high-status dramas indicates that creative freedom (or the perception thereof) is influential for both the construction of post-network status hierarchies and the way in which such hierarchies are perceived.

In addition, the data regarding audience reception of *Breaking Bad* provides some insight as to the reasons behind divergent interpretations of the same text. Privileged viewers' nuanced understanding of *Breaking Bad* supports earlier research (Bourdieu 1984; Morley 1992) regarding the importance of cultural capital when defined in terms of cultural codes. In this sample, there seems to be a relationship between formal education and the acquisition of the knowledge and codes necessary to fully appreciate culturally legitimated crime drama. In particular, privileged viewers possess the "elaborate" code (Bernstein 1973) needed to understand *Breaking Bad* as a narrative of moral transformation and Walter White as a complicated anti-heroic protagonist. Viewers with less education understand the show and its protagonist with a more "restricted" code.

Collectively, these findings also indicate a degree of similarity between European TV

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a greater variety of cultural forms (Peterson 1997), scholars have questioned the assumption that this behavior indicates a greater degree of tolerance and thus, the demise of snobbery (Bellavance 2008). Most significantly, the multi-method work of Warde and his coauthors demonstrates that omnivorous cultural consumption and status-based distinctions are not mutually exclusive phenomena in the United Kingdom; although qualitative evidence indicates that overt snobbishness is less common, activities like dining out (Warde, Martens, and Olsen 1999), taste (Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2008), and cultural participation (Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2007) continue to reflect social inequalities and remain potential sites for status-based exclusion. Similarly, in their analysis of gourmet food writing, Johnston and Baumann (2007) find that particular foods become legitimated through their positioning as either authentic or exotic. The authors interpret this legitimation as a resolution to the tension that exists between the inclusionary ideology of democratic cultural consumption and the exclusionary ideology of taste and distinction. Based on this research, it seems more appropriate to conceptualize diverse cultural consumption in terms of the tension between opposing cultural imperatives rather than as evidence indicating an absence of status-based distinction.

comedy audiences and American TV drama audiences. The industrial and technological changes that characterize the post-network era created an opportunity for a status hierarchy to emerge within American television. In this respect, post-network American television has come to resemble European television which has historically provided audiences with highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow content. It seems these changes have resulted in the emergence of similar television taste hierarchies. Yet, as the available research on European audiences only speaks to the engagement with television comedy, it seems premature to overstate the significance of these similarities. Furthermore, with a well-established tradition of serious television drama, it seems equally premature to assume middle-class American audiences watching cable drama in the post-network era will bear any resemble to European audiences past or present.

Conclusion:

The significance of these findings are limited by multiple factors. Addressing middle-class audiences through examinations of young-adults is complicated by the age of the respondents. The structural definition of class employed in this chapter which relies on education and occupation ensures that the youngest young-adults cannot be categorized as privileged. By virtue of still being full-time undergraduate students, ten of the thirty-one respondents addressed in this chapter have not had the opportunity to acquire any post-graduate education or possess a high-status occupation. Any number of these ten individuals might well go on to such things. Perhaps future research should incorporate socioeconomic background when assigning class

location to such young-adults.

An additional concern is related to a form of social desirability bias. Given the status hierarchies involved in this research, privileged middle-class audiences might very well like and appreciate network crime drama more than they are willing to admit in an interview. Similarly, they might feel the need to express their appreciation for culturally legitimated or high-status shows in strong terms. As a result, there is the possibility that what such viewers say about cable crime drama may have more to do with the way in which they wish to be perceived than in what they really like to watch. Put another way, the shared elements of privileged middle-class young-adults audience reception practices may reflect the strength of post-network discourses of legitimation and its hierarchies more so than actual viewing processes and pleasures. As I note in the next chapter, there are several reasons to believe that addressing the distinction between audience discourse regarding television and viewers' actual content preferences or modes of engagement will become increasingly important for critical audience research moving forward in the post-network era.

CHAPTER V

MIDDLE-CLASS AUDIENCES AND TV AS NEW MEDIA, POST-NETWORK STATUS HIERARCHIES IN 2015, AND EMERGING ISSUES IN CRITICAL AUDIENCE RECEPTION RESEARCH

Introduction:

In the network era, “television” implied a particular set of relationships. Although the role of television in public space has been well-documented (McCarthy 2001), television was largely conceptualized as a domestic medium. Whoever the viewer might be, the physical context of viewing was assumed to be inside the home. More specifically, the physical context of viewing was assumed to be in the living room. It was not until television sets became sufficiently affordable that families began owning more than one and placing them in more private domestic spaces like bedrooms (Cox 2011). In addition to being a domestic medium, the relationship between viewers and television texts was, first and foremost, defined by available content. As Lotz (2007) observes, “competition was primarily limited to programming supplied to local affiliates by three national networks that dictated production terms with studios; the networks offered the only outlets for high-budget original programming” (9). This limited content was delivered to viewers on a linear schedule that was determined by network programmers and their affiliate stations. Although reruns are a significant part of television history (Kompare 2004),

during the network era, viewers would not necessarily be aware of when missed programs would be rebroadcast. As a domestic medium with limited content available for viewers to choose from, television also implied a particular set of economic relationships between networks, advertisers, and audiences. After eliminating single-sponsor programming in the late-1950s and early-1960s, networks began selling 30-second advertisement spots, the majority of which were sold in packages before the beginning of the season. The rates charged for these spots was based on rudimentary information about audience size as determined by Nielsen ratings (Meehan 1990).

Midway through 2015 and well into the second decade of the post-network era, these relationships are no longer as dominant as they once were. Television consumption is no longer exclusively a domestic experience. There is evidence that "TV everywhere," referring to authenticated viewing of broadcast shows from channels one subscribes to on a cable or satellite network, is approaching mainstream use and is growing faster than other online video sources like YouTube and Hulu. Between 2013 and 2014, for example, TV everywhere engagement rose by 246% (Adobe Digital Index 2014, 3). Beyond dislocating viewers from the physical environment traditionally associated with television, viewers have dislocated themselves from the constraints of network scheduling. In 2013, nearly half of all American homes had a DVR (Wilcox 2013). At the beginning of this year, research found that more than three-quarters of American households have a DVR, subscribe to Netflix, or use on-Demand (VOD) from a cable or telecommunications provider (Leichtman Research Group 2015). Not surprisingly, the likelihood of having access to such modes of television engagement varies with socioeconomic class. More than two-thirds of households with annual incomes above $75,000 have a DVR as

compared to the less than a third of households with annual incomes below $30,000 (Leichtman Research Group 2015).

In addition, domestic television consumption has been impacted by the emergence of "second screen" technologies (Image 5.1). Referring to the use of a computing device (commonly a mobile device, such as a tablet or smartphone) while watching television, this audience behavior links television to a variety of digital media including social networking sites. The perceived popularity of second screen television viewing has already produced multiple reactions from major industry players. In 2013, for example, Nielsen introduced "social TV" measurements using the social media platform Twitter (Stelter 2013b). Yet, as many have noted (Shah 2013), such metrics only consider "mentions" on Twitter. This means that a user tweeting negative opinions about a show as it airs enhances that show's social TV metrics even if they are not watching. Nielsen's social TV measurements, however, do not include the company's other ratings data. As a consequence, these metrics are grossly over-representative of demographic groups that use Twitter (the most prominent of such groups is teenage girls). As mentioned in previous chapters, the radical expansion of content choices in the post-network era ensure that producers are fighting for ever slimmer slices of the audience. In 2014, for example, more than seventeen hundred series aired during primetime (Goodman 2015). Not surprisingly, the economics of television have changed substantially and advertisers are now publicly demanding more freedom to target messages to consumers (Steinberg 2015). Such freedom would reduce the amount of time networks have to fit ads into content from months to days.

Yet, despite audience fragmentation and increasingly diverse content that spreads across

Image 5.1: Screengrab of "second-screen experience in action on a Kindle Fire HDX at Amazon HQ" (source: http://www.geekwire.com/2013/amazon-debuts-second-screen-tv-experience-kindle-hdx-bezos-mum-living-room-plans/)

platforms, the idea of television still has a significant amount of cultural currency. Netflix, a digital content provider rather than a traditional television network, continues to market its products as television. Amazon, a company original built to deliver physical goods to consumers homes, does the same (Image 5.2). Although industrial and economic changes have destroyed the traditional television calender and new shows now appear year-round, Netflix tells subscribers about "seasons" of its political drama *House of Cards* (Image 5.3). In addition, with serialized narratives and viewers who now "binge watch" streaming video, Netflix organizes it content into roughly thirty or sixty minute chunks it calls "episodes" (Image 5.4). Similarly, YouTube allows users and producers to organize content into "channels" (Image 5.5).

With these issues in mind, this dissertation concludes with a summary of the audience reception research described in previous chapters, a consideration of TV drama's cultural hierarchy in 2015, and a discussion regarding the future of critical audience research. In light of the findings presented in chapter two and chapter four, the current post-network television landscape presents serious challenges to audience researchers. Ultimately, I argue that the future of audience research depends upon qualitative scholars' willingness to expand the kinds of material that constitute data. Critical audience analysis in the post-network era has the potential to make significant contributions to scholarly understandings of meaning-making within the context of a convergence culture. Yet, to do so, the obsessive concern with the productive activities of media consumers must be replaced with a more diffuse focus on the multiplicity of ways in which individuals do or do not engage with digital media.

Image 5.2: Advertisement for Amazon Original Series *Transparent* (2014-) (Source: http://www.indiansnews.com/2015/01/14/woody-allen-create-first-tv-show-amazon/)

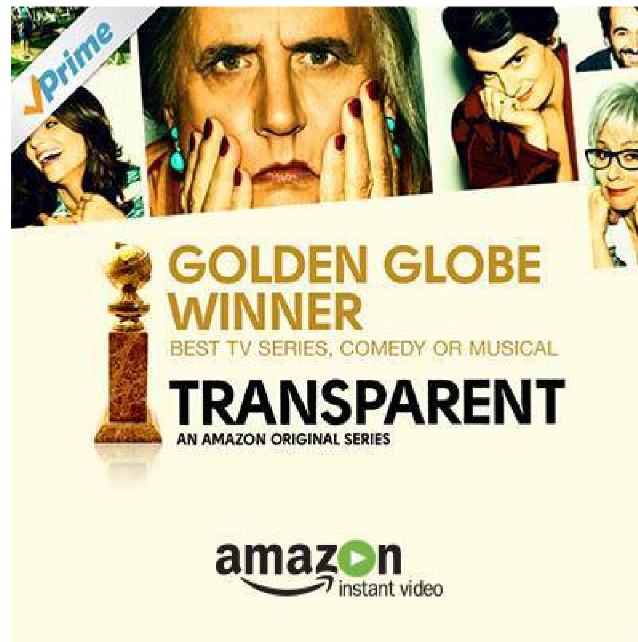


Image 5.3: Screengrab "House of Cards - Season 3 - Official Trailer - Netflix [HD]" (Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sU9QTLXYCCc)

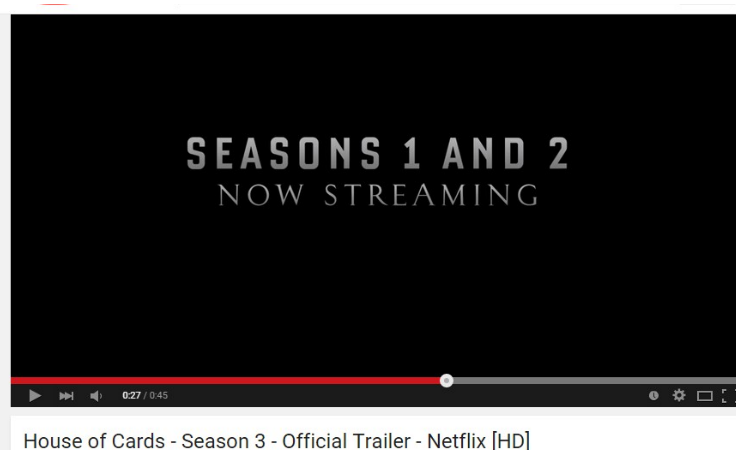


Image 5.4: Promo Advertisement for Orange is the New Black, Season Two (Source: http://oitnb.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/111.jpg)

Image 5.5: Screengrab "YouTube What to Watch" (Source: https://www.youtube.com/channels)

Middle-class Audiences in the Age of TV as New Media:

Using interviews with 50 young-adults (ages 18-34), this dissertation claims that the significance of post-network television's increasing cultural status varies with, but is not determined by, social location. Unlike earlier research addressing middle-class American television audiences, I find significant variation among middle-class viewers. Among privileged young-adults (where privilege is defined as having any amount of post-graduate education or a high-status occupation) with post-graduate degrees or high-status white-collar occupations, post-network television is frequently conceptualized as a form of cultural capital. Dramas like *Breaking Bad* are discussed as art. Cartoons *South Park* are understood as insightful social commentary. In contrast, television remains devalued for middle-class young-adults with less educational attainment and occupational prestige. There are stark differences between the findings of this research and Lamont's (1992) observation that television is a devalued leisure activity among upper-middle-class American men. If watching television was once outside the realm of middle-class appropriate behavior because of its association with a lack of intelligence and intellectual curiosity (Lamont 1992. 98), then, the social processes of post-network era television's cultural legitimation have mitigated the significance of such associations and some kinds of television have become middle-class appropriate.

The interview data in chapter two highlights how greater access to discourses of cultural legitimacy allow privileged middle-class young-adults the opportunity to treat post-network television content as a form of cultural capital. This indicates a degree of similarity between post-network television and other forms of new media, such as the internet, regarding issues of

cultural inequality. As internet scholarship makes clear, the relationship between new media and inequality is significantly more complicated than structural limitations on access. Using their greater access to discourses of television's cultural legitimacy, privileged middle-class young-adults place higher value on the cultural competencies required by post-network television and socially distance themselves from those seen as lacking this ability. In contrast, like the dominant American middle-class taste frameworks emphasizing individual subjectivity, less privileged respondents frequently explained personal preference in subjective terms and resisted critical judgment. Without access to legitimating post-network discourses, it is less secured middle-class audiences who maintain the old distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate forms of middle-class leisure.

By focusing exclusively on prime-time cable crime drama, the interview data in chapter four makes it possible to identify the ways in which audience reception varies with the social location of middle-class viewers and with the cultural status of particular texts. Privileged middle-class young-adults' engagement with cable crime drama includes three common features: claiming the distinction between network and cable shows has status implications, holding positive attitudes towards textual features that deviate from network era norms like serialized narratives and moral ambiguous protagonists, and attempting to generate distance between themselves and network content and audiences. Despite the commonality of these practices, I also found variation among privileged respondents. Those who had seen both culturally legitimated and high-status cable crime dramas differ from their peers in three ways: they are explicitly appreciative of content that does not cater to traditional audience needs, they

frequently invoke discourses of legitimation that connect television to high-status cultural forms, and having a broader knowledge of cable crime drama, these privileged middle-class young-adults are able make fine-grain status distinctions within the genre.

I find that the audience reception practices of non-privileged middle-class young-adults are primarily oriented toward a given crime drama's textual features. Issues like the appeal of characters and narrative structure are particularly significant. Unlike privileged respondents, the distinction between network and cable crime drama is not significant and little attention is given to the status of particular shows. In addition, non-privileged middle-class respondents acknowledge that their engagement with cable crime drama is distinct from their other television viewing practices. Nonetheless, their discussions of anti-heroic protagonists lack the conflicted moral allegiance typically associated with viewer attachment to such characters. For these middle-class young-adults, there is a disconnect between the protagonist's moral ambiguity that is encoded into some post-network crime dramas and the decoding which understands these characters as traditional network era television heroes. It is one thing to "root for the bad guy," as the saying goes, but it is quite another to root for a sociopath as the embodiment of virtue.

Although, the increasing availability of post-network content did present some methodological challenges, many of the issues associated with the emergence of television as a form of new media remained on the periphery while conducting this research. As discussed in chapter four, only a single respondent discussed access as a significant factor in their viewing choices. This could suggest that the middle-class young-adults in the sample were sufficiently adept at navigating digital technology that access was simply not an issue. However, exaggerated

proclamations regarding the digital skills of young-adults function as a means to leave structural inequality unexamined and promote traditional notions of meritocracy. As Vaidhyanathan (2008) observes, “Talk of a 'digital generation' or people who are 'born digital' willfully ignores the vast range of skills, knowledge, and experience of many segments of society. It ignores the needs and perspectives of those young people who are not socially or financially privileged. It presumes a level playing field and equal access to time, knowledge, skills, and technologies.” Considering such issues, it seems more likely that issues of access were not particularly salient for middle-class young-adults for two reasons.

First, many of these individuals could indeed overcome the obstacles associated with accessing any and all television content given a sufficient level of motivation. No respondents expressed moral or legal concerns regarding copyright law or the intellectual property rights of media producers. Second, with an seemingly endless array of television content to be watched, perhaps many of these middle-class young-adults simply never had issues with access because the sources they use to watch television keep acquiring more content with the express purpose of keeping consumers interested. As a corollary to access, issues related to mobile viewing also were not significant for the respondents in this sample. The ability to watch “anytime, anywhere” was largely taken-for-granted. No respondents reported watching television content on their cell phones. Tablets, laptop and desktop computers were discussed interchangeably. Engaging with streaming services on a computer or through a television with an additional device like Google's Chromecast or Amazon's Fire TV Stick (auxiliary devices that plug-in to a digital television's HDMI port) was not a meaningful distinction.[67] With access to a wireless network, these devices

67 Chromecast costs around thirty dollars while the Fire TV Stick is slightly more expensive at forty

allow a viewer to access content their subscribe to and streaming services like Netflix and Hulu. Similar capabilities are also available through DVD players with wireless capabilities. Given the declining profitability of home video (Lieberman 2015), the absence of DVDs in middle-class young-adults discussions of post-network television is not particularly surprising. Collectively, respondents engagement with the various manifestations of television as new media seem to point to the old industry saying that “content is king.” As a rare point of continuity with network era television, middle-class young-adults' engagement with post-network television is driven by their desire to engage with particular shows, personalities, etc., rather than driven by a desire to engage with television through a particular platform or in a particular (cultural or physical) space.

In a broader cultural context, this research demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the relationship between cultural consumption and social class. When addressing social class in America, these issues are further complicated by the American tendency to claim middle-class status as the normative identity. Yet, this work begins to connect the broader social processes through which objects and knowledge become cultural capital with the specific practices and discursive resources that allow class symbols, knowledge, and identities to be constructed as meaningful. In contrast to fan studies research which examines communities of consumption in relation to specific texts, this dissertation adds to the growing body of television studies scholarship that understands watching TV as behavior situated within the new media environment created by digital technology (Sienkiewicz and Marx 2014; Tryon and Dawson 2013). Moving away from notions of the audience defined by fan productivity, this work opens a

dollars (although individuals continue to pay subscription fees for services like Netflix and Hulu).

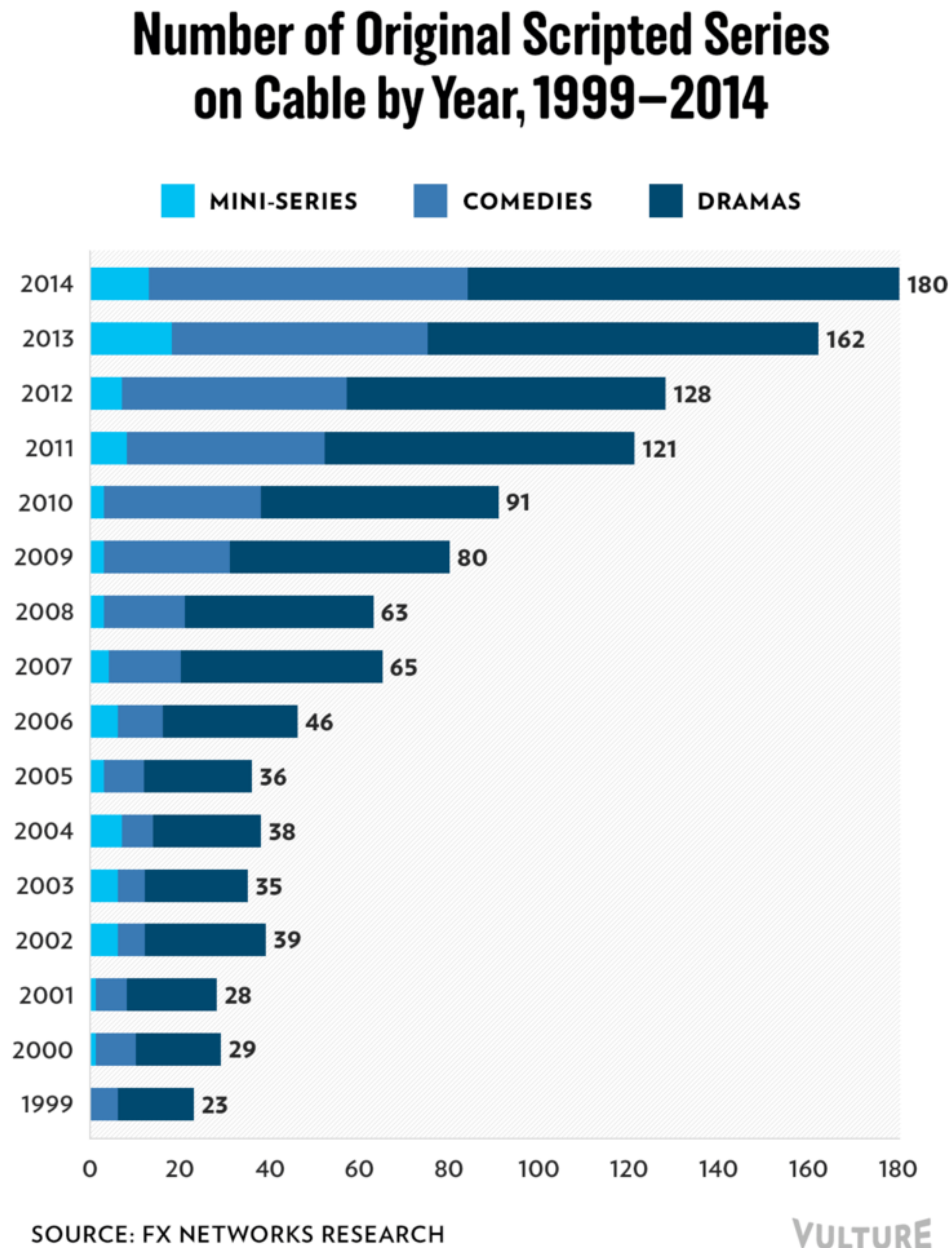
new direction for empirical study within television's increasingly fragmented landscape. Before considering future avenues for critical audience research, a brief consideration of television's contemporary status hierarchies is necessary to bring several additional issues into focus.

Post-Network Status Hierarchies in 2015:

In chapter three, I argue that the cultural hierarchy of post-network cable crime drama can be understood in terms of three categories: culturally legitimated shows, high status shows, and low status shows. Since this hierarchy was first constructed, however, the amount of content in the post-network landscape has continued to grow (Image 5.4). New cable channels are producing original drama series. The number of shows produced by online content distributors, including Amazon and Netflix, seems to grow daily. And, it seems, all of this new content has had a curious impact on post-network status hierarchies. In the last several years, a growing chorus of critics have begun claiming that American television has entered a “silver” age. The first such proclamation was made by *Grantland*'s widely respected television critic Andy Greenwald. Writing about *Homeland* in September 2012, he applauded the show for “establishing itself as the first pillar of a new (Silver?) age” (Greenwald 2012). According to Greenwald, the hyper-masculinity and the anti-heroic tropes of *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and other shows of the third golden age grew stale. In this context, he explains that *Homeland* reflects the efforts of showrunners who are willing to work in the environment the golden age created:

> The credit for this balancing act goes to executive producers (and longtime writing partners) Alex Gansa and Howard Gordon. In

Image 5.4: Number of Original Scripted Series on Cable by Year, 1999-2014 (Source: http://www.vulture.com/2015/01/why-you-feel-like-theres-too-much-tv-to-watch.html)



> marked contrast to the Golden Age showrunners whose best work seemed to be angrily reactive — think David Chase indulging Tony Soprano's every dream sequence and denying his viewers the bloody finale they felt they'd earned, or David Simon using the carrot of a crime show as a stick to batter a complacent, ignorant audience — Gansa and Gordon are happy to create within the preexisting system, not punch and kick their way out of it.

Yet, Greenwald wrote these words on the eve of *Homeland*'s second season premiere. By the end of the show's third season, he (among many others) was singing a different tune as the season finale "revealed the show I once loved to be utterly, perhaps irreparably broken" (Greenwald 2013b). Other critics agreed. Between the second and third seasons, the show's metascore fell by nineteen dropping from ninety-six to seventy-seven.

Indeed, by mid-2013, the notion of a "silver" age solidified and it seemed as if the third golden age was coming to an end. As the final half-season of *Breaking Bad* approached, many critics came to understand that *Homeland* was not representative of what follows in the wake of greatness but rather representative of greatness tarnished. In a piece titled "How The Silver Age Of Television Arrived Without Anyone Realizing It," McGee (2013) notes that the silver age must necessarily be defined in contrast to the golden age shows driven by "the anti-hero male figure at the center, with whom the audience was supposed to be simultaneously revolted by yet inexorably drawn towards." He argues:

> What I propose is that we take Greenwald's Silver Age as an entity that consists not only of *Homeland*, but a host of other shows that simultaneously already fall into it. It's not easy to see how all of them fit into a singular age, because 1) they don't have an easily identifiable thread connecting them, such as "male anti-hero", and 2) they come in the wake of other golden age shows that pushed the boundaries outwards to allow for this current crop to exist in the first place. (Shorter version: It's far easier to be the show that

follows *The Shield* than to be *The Shield*.)

Indeed, the second time one sees a police officer shoots another police officer in the face at the end of a show's pilot episode it must necessarily be less interesting than the first time.

Using AMC's zombie-drama *The Walking Dead* as an example to compare the third golden age to the silver age that followed, McGee asks, “Is *The Walking Dead* as good as the shows that constitute the Golden Age?” He answers, “I would argue 'not remotely,' but its preeminence in the current television field simply cannot be ignored. If the Golden Age was defined almost exclusively by quality, the Silver Age is defined as much by its cultural relevance and resonance.” Shows like HBO's *Game of Thrones* support such claims as it is low-rated (Thomas 2012a), the most pirated content online (McGregor 2014), and a cash cow (Garofalo 2014) for its network. Like McGee, Greenwald also sees *The Walking Dead* as indicative of decline. He writes:

> Rather than innovating or acknowledging risk, ratings-obsessed programmers at even the most respected channels have fallen back into a disheartening pattern of pandering, copying, and outright cannibalism. Lasting artistic eras are formed either by building intelligently on what has come before or by explicitly rejecting it. They don’t happen when people are content to hunker down and gnaw on the dusty bones of the past. Nothing gold can stay, but it’s time we acknowledge just what has taken its place. Welcome to television’s Zombie Age. (Greenwald 2013a)

In particular, Greenwald expresses concern that the drive for ratings, with some passing nods towards prestige, reduces the quality of TV as “this breathless quest to re-create the last big thing has left little to no room for what I’ll call the medium-level show: series about people interacting in ways that don’t involve swordplay or savagery; concepts not spun off from previous hits;

dramas that can't be described via prestige mad libs (PERIOD + VICE = GREEN LIGHT)." In early 2015, the final half-season of *Mad Men* produced similar hand-wringing (Zoller Seitz 2015; Sims, Gilbert, and Cruz 2015).

Although there is some dissent (VanDerWerff (2015a), for example, argues that he would "stack the current run of programs against anything from the so-called Golden Age"), many critics seem to think that the silver age is here to stay. Telling readers that "it's time to admit that we've now deeply settled into a Silver Age of TV that might last a long while," Stuever (2015), observes that the explosion of choices available to viewers undeniably altered post-network status hierarchies:

> With an increase in expectations and a glut of new programming, we've become accustomed to shows that are, at their best, pretty good instead of brilliant. The fact that there are more dramas in production now than ever — for broadcast, cable and premium channels and streaming services — killed off the Golden Age instead of prolonging it; in the Silver Age, pretty good is good enough, so long as you can convince a handful of influential viewers that they've found their new favorite show.

This seems to accurately describe the current state of affairs. Furthermore, complaints about "too much" good TV speak to the plethora of "pretty good" options available to contemporary audiences (Barney 2015; Owen 2014).

In relation to crime drama rather than drama more broadly, understanding these silver age hierarchies is complicated by a variety of factors including international distribution rights, branding and name recognition, and the flow of creative talent in Hollywood from movies to

TV.[68] Netflix's crime drama *Lilyhammer* (2013-),[69] for example, features Steven Van Zandt as a fictional New York gangster, Frank "The Fixer" Tagliano (a very thinly veiled redeployment of Van Zandt's character in *The Sopranos* Silvio Dante, who was Tony's deadly consigliere and a strip club owner). Prior to his work on *The Sopranos*, Van Zandt was best known as the radio disc jockey "Little Steven" and as a member of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, in which he plays guitar and mandolin. In terms of its narrative, *Lilyhammer* is a fish-out-of-water story where the fish is an over-the-top Italian-American stereotype and the water is contemporary Norway where the nation struggles to meet the obligations of its generous welfare state and must come to terms with its cultural identity in the face of North African immigration.

The show was marketed as *Netflix's* first foray into the world of original television programming (Greene 2013). Yet, in actuality, *Lilyhammer* is a joint venture between Netfilx and Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's main television channel NRK. The series premiere was watched by one in five Norwegians (Roxborough 2012). The show's popularity among Netflix subscribers, however, remains a mystery as Netflix refuses to release data regarding the viewership of its shows (Lowry 2015). In addition, Netflix has not given *Lilyhammer* the

68 Moving from crime drama to political drama, international distribution rights ensure that television audiences in a small nation like Israel in which Netflix does not operate (the size of the potential audience is unlikely to offset the cost of adhering to copyright law), nonetheless have the ability to watch shows like *House of Cards* almost as soon as they become available to American audiences. Despite being Netflix's proprietary content and despite the unavailability of Netflix to internet users with Israeli IP addresses, by purchasing the broadcasting rights to the show, an Israeli television network is able to broadcast new episodes (with commercials) on a weekly or nightly basis.

69 Although Netflix's *Orange is the New Black* is dramatic and certainly includes crime, each episode of the show is only thirty minutes. As such, it seems inappropriate to include it in discussions of hour-long dramas. Although one could claim that this decision, which would also exclude Showtime's *Weeds* from the category, reinforces the gendered hierarchies that align hyper-masculine anti-heroic dramas with more prestige, the lighter feel of these shows supports this decision. In addition, first appearing in 2013, *Orange is the New Black* did not premiere until after the category of hour-long crime drama was defined.

marketing push several of its other series have received like *Orange is the New Black* and *House of Cards*. As it relates to the status hierarchy of prime-time cable crime drama, if we are willing to lump a Netflix drama in with cable more broadly, locating *Lilyhammer* is particularly difficult because it is unclear exactly who the show's intended audience is. Is Netflix hoping to attract *Sopranos* fans eager to catch a glimpse of a beloved character in the portrayal of an unrelated fictional gangster? Is Netflix micro-targeting the presumably very niche audience of American television viewers with significant interest in Norwegian culture? Although these issues are unresolved, there seems to be little chance that *Lilyhammer* is currently or will eventually become culturally legitimated as reflected by its first season Metascore of 63.

Regarding the consequences of branding and other marketing related forces on the cable crime drama status hierarchy, WETV's first original series, *The Divide* (2014), is a useful example. Canceled after a single eight episode season, the show addresses a range of timely issues including racial conflict, police corruption, mass incarceration, and the consequences of the war on the drugs. At the level of the text, the show was centered around a case worker and a district attorney, had a complicated but not obtuse narrative and a gripping and suspenseful season finale. With many of the characteristics associated with cultural legitimation in the post-network era, *The Divide* had a lot to offer elite audiences. Yet, by virtue of appearing on a network without a successful track record of producing prestige drama, ratings were abysmal. But unlike other shows with dedicated fan bases or those whose production agreements make a less popular show profitable (Van Der Werff 2015b), *The Divide* was unceremoniously canceled (Ng 2014). There were no Kickstarter campaigns. There series was not picked up by Hulu. In

chapter three, *The Divide* is categorized as a high-status show. Now it seems obvious to wonder if a show can be high-status when very few viewers knew it existed.

Given the increasingly complicated nature of status hierarchies as television moves deeper into the post-network era, the relevance of such status for future audience reception research is uncertain. There is little reason to doubt that television's elevated status as a cultural form will stop being reflected in viewers' engagement. Yet, as audience fragmentation increases, the likelihood of finding respondents who are viewers of a range of relevant content as this research managed to gather seems to lessen. As it happens, this research was conducted at the end of a brief window during which a small number of thematically similar texts became culturally significant in ways that would have been impossible for earlier television drama. And during this window, the remnants of the network era's mass audience had splintered but not yet totally disintegrated. With an ever-increasing amount of content, it seems unlikely that new shows will be able to become culturally legitimated by appealing to a sufficient number of niches among elite American television audiences. Some claim the most innovative portion of the contemporary television landscape is comedy. But there is little to reason to think a half-hour sitcom or sketch comedy show can achieve the same sort of legitimation as a crime drama like *The Wire*.

Moving forward, new opportunities to address cultural consumption as it relates to status hierarchies through audience reception of American television will emerge. Although the realities of consuming ninety-two hours of *Mad Men* or eighty-six hours of *The Sopranos* create barriers that Hollywood film has not had to traverse (although those who have seen all five *Die Hard*

films may beg to differ), perhaps the culturally legitimated cable dramas of the early post-network era will find new audiences as "classics." Yet, much like fandom, the sort of cult engagement associated with such modes of appreciation cannot be considered audience reception in its truest sense. In the age of television as new media, it seems that audiences are separated conceptually from fans, cultists, and users by their ability to stand comfortably on the sidelines of an culture that relentlessly exhorts its own participatory qualities.

Future Directions for Critical Reception Research:

Assessing the state of contemporary audience scholarship, Gray (2014) asserts that one of the ways to fill current gaps involves "taking control of the stats." He argues, "There's this funny thing that media and cultural studies academics do, wherein we excoriate positivism and quantitative work, yet regularly fall back on others' numbers when it's convenient. Almost all of us believe in numbers deep down." What exactly taking control of the "stats" would do remains unclear. In addition, the nature of the contribution media scholars with humanities backgrounds could make if they throw down their Foucault and pick up slide rules is similarly unspecified. The central problem with the "stats" is the same now as it was when Meehan (1990) critiqued television ratings during the multichannel transition. Nielsen is a monopoly and its clients are heavily invested in the status quo. As NBC President of Research and Media Development Alan Wurtzel has stated, "Listen, Nielsen is a monopoly. They're the only game in town. [Their ratings] are the only currency" (Herrman 2011). In this context, it is unsurprising that Nielsen focuses on the blue-chip demographic groups most valued by advertisers and the viewing

behaviors of people of color, young people, and other less valuable demographic groups are under-represented in ratings data (Li 2013).

Gray's (2014) other, more reasonable suggestion to develop contemporary audience scholarship is through ethnography. He notes, “Audience studies in the critical/cultural tradition enjoyed a boom in the 80s and 90s, but has nowhere near the same following now. Rephrased, television underwent a series of major industrial shifts at the end of the 90s, and we don’t have enough ethnography to make sense of the ensuing environment.” Yet, as Ang (1995) noted in the years leading up to the post-network era, “What matters is not the certainty of knowledge about audiences, but an ongoing critical and intellectual engagement with the multifarious ways in which we constitute ourselves through media consumption” (52). In fact, there is little reason to believe that simply having more information about what viewers are watching, how they are watching, or where they are watching will result in better critical audience scholarship.

The large amounts of information regarding actual consumer behavior frequently associated with the label “big data” is a useful stand-in as its limitations regarding the development of theoretical conceptions of the audience are fairly obvious. For decades, audience scholars have been aware that time diary data, Nielsen's most common data collection method, is not particularly reliable as a given viewer might reasonably want whoever is looking to believe they are watching PBS's *Newshour* rather than TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. With this knowledge, big data's revelations about viewer behavior are unsurprising. In the popular press, Netflix's VP of product innovation and personalization algorithms Carlos Gomez-Uribe made a big splash by telling a reporter, “A lot of people tell us they often watch foreign movies or

documentaries. But in practice, that doesn't happen very much" (Vanderbilt 2013). This knowledge, that some people would like others to believe that they are the sort of person who watches foreign film are themselves not actually interested in watching any foreign films, cannot be considered new.

This is not to say that there is nothing new going on with audiences and there can be little doubt that the current post-network television landscape presents serious challenges to audience researchers. Technological innovation (digital video recorders, video on demand, the internet, etc.) and industrial shifts including conglomeration produce an environment in which choice has increased to such a degree that producers like advertiser supported cable networks can afford to create programming that will be seen by a comparatively low number of viewers. In this context, the future of audience research depends upon qualitative scholars' willingness to expand the kinds of material that constitute data. In contrast with Gray (2014) who laments media scholars' reliance on undergraduates and industry reports for knowledge regarding contemporary audiences, I believe the institutionalization of television studies creates opportunities for audience research at a time when such work is increasingly difficult. Courses structured around single courses have the potential to generate significant data that has the potential to serve as one piece of a much larger puzzle. Regarding undergraduates in particular, Gray (2014) writes, "many of our undergrad classes skew young, middle class, white … we're seeing very little of what's actually happening more broadly." As I have argued (Wayne 2016), data regarding the ways in which undergraduates at multiple universities relate to *The Wire* runs counter to Gray's claim regarding the the limited significance of reception practices among this particular segment

of the television audience. In fact, if the object of inquiry is related to modes of cultural engagement, then the comparative analysis of undergraduates as television audiences in particular contexts can, in fact, speak to broader shifts in the post-network era.

By using several methodological techniques including content analysis, cyber-ethnography, close reading, and "passing ethnography" (Couldry 2003) as supplements to traditional audience research, qualitative data gathered from professional television critics, online fans, undergraduates and media academics can all be understood to reflect broader shifts in the reception practices of post-network audiences. Such methodological triangulation would create opportunities for media studies to return to the audience-centered analysis that helped define the field while also providing a much needed complimentary perspective to the glut of contemporary scholarship addressing media industries. Using integrated conceptions of cultural engagement rather than defining consumption in terms of specific media systems or cultural forms, critical audience analysis focusing on television reception can make significant contributions to our understanding of the relationship between digital media and categorical identity (race, class, and gender) by examining the ways in which individuals move through increasingly media social worlds without the exaggerated emphasis on notions of "users" or other forms of the hyperactive consumer.

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APPENDIX

Interview Schedule for Middle-Class Young-Adults:

1. How do you usually watch TV? (cable, satellite, DVR, web, netflix, etc.)

2. Do you watch some kinds of content more than others? (sports, news, entertainment, etc.)

3. What shows do you enjoy watching?

4. Do you watch some channels more often than others?

5. Do you watch reality TV? Which shows?

6. What kind of experiences with television did you have when you were younger?

7. Do you still like the same kinds of show? How have your preferences changed over time?

8. Have you watched anything recently that you particularly enjoyed?

9. Have you watched anything recently that you didn't really like?

10. Do you ever watch seasons of shows on DVD?

11. Besides TV, do you have other hobbies, interests, etc?

12. Do you read for pleasure? How often?

13. Do you ever talk about TV with people in the course of your day-to-day life?

14. Do you talk to different people about different shows?

15. Do you think that most people watch the same kinds of shows that you do?

16. Do you watch shows on HBO, Showtime, or AMC?

17. Do you watch original shows on cable channels like TBS, TNT, FX, etc?

Interview Schedule for Cable Crime Drama Viewers:

Personal Background Questions

1. What is your full name?

2. What is your preferred email address?

3. How old are you?

4. What is your current occupation?

5. What is your gender identity?

Male		Female		Other	

6. Do you identify as a member of a racial/ethnic/religious minority group? Which?

7a. What is the highest educational degree that you have earned?

H.S. (or equivalent)	
Associate's	
Bachelor's	
Master's	
J.D., M.D. or Ph.D.	

7b. If you are currently a student, what degree are you earning?

TV Background Questions

8. Do you pay for cable or satellite TV at home?

Yes	
No	

9. Do you pay for internet access at home?

Yes	
No	

10a. Have you ever posted on a television fan forum or website?

Yes	
No	

10b. If yes, regarding what television show(s)?

11. How do you usually watch the show(s) mentioned on the flyer?

TV	
Internet	
DVD	
Other	

12. What are some of the shows (other than the shows mentioned on the flyer) that you are currently watching on a regular basis?

How Well Do You Know RELEVANT CABLE DRAMA?

13. Do you know who created RELEVANT CABLE DRAMA?

14. Can you briefly describe the current or most recent season of RELEVANT CABLE DRAMA?

15. How many episodes or seasons of RELEVANT CABLE DRAMA have you seen?

16. Do you have a favorite season or episode of RELEVANT CABLE DRAMA? Can you explain why?

17. Do you have a favorite character in RELEVANT CABLE DRAMA? Can you explain why?

List of High-Status Occupations:[70]

N-P-B	TITLE
100	Dentists
100	Physicians and surgeons
99	Astronomers and physicists
99	Lawyers
99	Optometrists
99	Podiatrists
98	Mathematicians
98	Economists
98	Judges, magistrates, and other judicial workers
98	Veterinarians
97	Natural sciences managers
97	Chiropractors
97	Pharmacists
96	Engineering managers
96	Actuaries
96	Nuclear engineers
96	Urban and regional planners
95	Aerospace engineers
95	Chemical engineers
95	Environmental engineers
95	Petroleum engineers
94	Financial analysts
94	Computer software engineers
94	Civil engineers
94	Electrical and electronics engineers
94	Engineers, all other
94	Atmospheric and space scientists
93	Chief executives
93	Computer and information systems managers
93	Mechanical engineers
93	Medical scientists
93	Environmental scientists and geoscientists
93	Psychologists
92	Education administrators

70 Occupations are considered high-status if they have scores above eighty on the Nam–Powers–Boyd Occupational Status Scale (Nam and Boyd 2004)

List of High-Status Occupations (cont.):

N-P-B	TITLE
92	Personal financial advisors
92	Architects, except naval
92	Marine engineers and naval architects
92	Materials engineers
92	Sociologists
92	Aircraft pilots and flight engineers
91	Financial examiners
91	Miscellaneous mathematical science occupations
91	Agricultural engineers
91	Biomedical engineers
91	Mining and geological engineers, including mining safety engineers
91	Chemists and materials scientists
91	Physical scientists, all other
91	Audiologists
90	Marketing and sales managers
90	Computer programmers
90	Operations research analysts
90	Statisticians
90	Industrial engineers, including health and safety
90	Physical therapists
90	Sales engineers
89	Public relations managers
89	Budget analysts
89	Computer scientists and systems analysts
89	Database administrators
89	Technical writers
88	Biological scientists
88	Conservation scientists and foresters
88	Other education, training, and library workers
88	Occupational therapists
87	Market and survey researchers
87	Speech-language pathologists
87	Detectives and criminal investigators
87	Securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents
86	General and operations managers
86	Advertising and promotions managers
86	Financial managers
86	Purchasing managers

List of High-Status Occupations (cont.):

N-P-B	**TITLE**
86	Secondary school teachers
86	Producers and directors
85	Medical and health services managers
85	Accountants and auditors
85	First-line supervisors/managers of police and detectives
84	Industrial production managers
84	Network systems and data communications analysts
84	Surveyors, cartographers, and photogrammetrists
84	Radiation therapists
84	Air traffic controllers and airfield operations specialists
83	Logisticians
83	Network and computer systems administrators
83	Agricultural and food scientists
83	Elementary and middle school teachers
83	Registered nurses
83	First-line supervisors/managers of fire fighting and prevention workers
83	Fish and game wardens
82	Administrative services managers
82	Human resources managers
82	Insurance underwriters
82	Miscellaneous social scientists and related workers
82	Librarians
81	Appraisers and assessors of real estate

Recruiting Flyer for Premium Cable Crime Drama:

WATCH CABLE TV CRIME DRAMA?

Seeking young adults (18-34) for an interview regarding premium cable crime dramas including Boardwalk Empire Homeland, Dexter, The Sopranos or The Wire for research by a graduate student in sociology, University of Virginia

- Interviews will last approximately 1 – 1.5 hours
- Participants will be compensated with a $20 Best Buy gift card

For more information please:

- email Michael Wayne at **mikewayne@virginia.edu**
- write PREMIUM CABLE in the subject line
- IRB SBS # 2013004000 **Principal Investigator:** Michael Wayne

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Recruiting Flyer for Basic Cable Crime Drama:

WATCH CABLE TV CRIME DRAMA?

Seeking young adults (18-34) for an interview regarding basic cable crime dramas including Burn Notice, The Closer, Sons of Anarchy, Rizzoli & Isles, or White Collar by a graduate student in sociology, University of Virginia

- Interviews will last approximately 1 – 1.5 hours
- Participants will be compensated with a $20 Best Buy gift card

For more information please:

- email Michael Wayne at **mikewayne@virginia.edu**
- write BASIC CABLE in the subject line
- IRB SBS # 2013004000 **Principal Investigator:** Michael Wayne

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