

## Using 'network' theory in the post-network era: fictional 9/11 US television discourse as a 'cultural forum'

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It is likely that the appliance known as 'television' is too multifaceted, broad and contradictory ever to be understood as a coherent entity, despite efforts to theorize it as such. Shifts over the past two decades in the industrial operation, technological form and breadth of content of the box that is simultaneously a mere appliance and a cultural arbiter have appropriately inspired new reflections and retheorization. Whether described as a transition from a classical network system to a post-network era – as has been the dominant conversation in the USA – or theorized as a transition from an era of scarcity through one of availability to one of plenty, as suggested by one recent British work,<sup>1</sup> there appears to be agreement that the object of study is shifting in significant ways. These changes in television as an object of inquiry necessitate reassessment of the theoretical lenses through which we have viewed this significant industrial, technological and cultural artefact.

The most profound changes require that we reconsider television's status as a mass medium. Television remains a ubiquitous media form and a technology widely owned and used in the USA and many similarly industrialized nations, but the vast expansion in the multiplicity of networks streaming through its corporeal structure has diminished the degree to which cultures encounter television viewing as a common experience. Television arguably remains the most 'mass'

<sup>1</sup> John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: IB Tauris, 2000).

- 2 See Charlotte Brunsdon, 'What is the 'television' of television studies?', in Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (eds), *The Television Studies Book* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 95–113.

medium, but its content has grown more narrowly targeted so that the audience at any one moment is often more accurately theorized as a collection of niches rather than as a mass.

This redefinition of television's sociocultural operation requires reassessment of theories constructed to understand the medium in its network era context. Most of the foundational theories guiding the study of television were developed at a specific moment in which a particular set of institutional operations governed global norms for the international media industry. These norms of institutional relations and practices have changed in both subtle and radical ways since the establishment of foundational models, and these theoretical frameworks now require reassessment to account for institutional and cultural changes.

In the case of US television, the emergence of new broadcast competitors and the overwhelming penetration of cable and satellite systems with their delivery of a vast multiplicity of networks are but two of many changes that have altered the US television industry, while other national contexts have experienced similar expansions in both public and privately operated networks. Television continues to occupy a central place in US media use, but the degree to which broad audiences share content has eroded significantly as a consequence of the expansion in programming providers. Although the 'hardware' of television technology has changed slightly, its 'applications' have multiplied extensively, altering audiences' perception of 'television' and necessitating address of the most basic question, 'what is television?', in this emergent cultural and institutional environment.<sup>2</sup> Much foundational media theory is rooted in the presumption of widely shared texts, and the degree to which a truly mass audience sees fewer and fewer common texts necessitates reconsideration of this and other assumptions supporting the critical study of television.

In this essay I focus on Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch's 'cultural forum model' of television, and attend to some of its less frequently emphasized aspects in the task of determining how it may or may not remain a valuable model for the critical analysis of television texts. As an object, 'television' was once more simple and understandable as a fairly monolithic entity. At that time, universalizing models offered exceptional explanatory value. Various industrial and cultural factors redefining 'television' require that those who study the medium pay closer attention to the model they use relative to the phenomenon they seek to study. Grounding television scholarship in theories that address how the post-network era adjusts the object of study necessitates that we explore how the changed institutional environment has altered many of the assertions, rightly assumed by the cultural forum model, which now seem of questionable validity.

The essay closes with an application that illustrates the continued utility of the cultural forum model in examining a topic or theme present across a variety of programmes or episodes. In the months

following the events of 9/11 in New York and Washington, at least fourteen hours of fictional dramatic narrative dealt with themes such as racial profiling and stereotyping, privacy erosion, suspension of due process rights, possibilities for activism, and the general altered reality resulting from the fear engendered by the attacks. The cultural forum is the model best used to explore such a narrative phenomenon because of its tools for incorporating the breadth of texts and the multiple valences of their stories. Understanding television to create a cultural forum in its broadest sense also requires the consideration of non-narrative texts such as news and documentaries. Focusing on only the forms of narrative storytelling that receive less critical attention, however, reveals the continued viability of the cultural forum, as well as types of research to which it is not as well-suited as a critical framework.

### Television as a cultural forum

The supposition that television as a medium creates a cultural forum underpins much existing critical television scholarship, although this is not always explicitly stated. This foundational model, initially proposed in 1983, focuses aspects of the approach to studying culture emerging in British cultural studies on US television.<sup>3</sup> With this model, Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch attempt to reconcile divergent approaches and emphases resulting from the bifurcated intellectual history of much US media scholarship by blending the approach of communication scholars who studied television as a *communication medium* with that of film and literary scholars who considered it an *aesthetic object*. Newcomb and Hirsch's essay goes beyond the titular naming of a model for studying television to offer an explanation of one of the central questions in media studies – how a commercial mass-mediated form presents content with varying ideological valences. The cultural forum model contains at least three interrelated assertions that argue for the significance or consequence of television as a mass medium, assertions related to the scope of television's reach, its ability to provide a space for the negotiation of ideological positions, and as a process-based system of representation and discourse. The cultural forum model consequently has supported a broad range of scholarship that examines television with recognition of its complexity, although some have added a clearer statement of the operation of power within the model.<sup>4</sup>

The title of Newcomb and Hirsch's essay suggests the first of three assertions maintained by the model through assumptions one might make about the scope required of a medium for its influence to be significant enough to create a 'cultural forum'. Television provides a cultural forum precisely because of its vast reach both in terms of geography and culture. Three national networks defined US 'television' in the network era of the article's composition. When audiences or scholars referred to television, they meant ABC, CBS and NBC, and

3 Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, 'Television as a cultural forum', in Horace Newcomb (ed.), *Television: the Critical View* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 503–15. Originally published in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Summer 1983).

4 Horace Newcomb's 1984 article, 'On the dialogic aspects of mass communication', might be read as a coda to his contribution to the culture forum model, as he adds an explanation of the operation of power missing from the work coauthored with Hirsch. Here, he roots his textual analysis in theories of hegemony emerging at that time from British cultural studies, and uses a version of hegemony more flexible than that utilized by scholars such as Gitlin. Horace Newcomb, 'On the dialogic aspects of mass communication', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1984), pp. 34–50.

5 Horace Newcomb, *TV: the Most Popular Art* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1974), p. 244. My emphasis.

6 The article draws from Stuart Hall, 'Encoding and decoding in the television discourse', in *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 128–38, to make this assertion.

7 Newcomb and Hirsch, 'Television as a cultural forum', p. 506.

8 Ibid, p. 508. Emphasis in original.

9 Ibid.

10 Ellis, *Seeing Things*, pp. 74–129.

perhaps on occasion PBS or a few particularly vibrant independent stations. The scope assertion follows Newcomb's 1974 statement on the significance of television study that argues, 'Television is a crucially important object of study not only because it is a new "form", a different "medium", but because it brings its *massive* audience into a direct relationship with particular sets of values and attitudes'.<sup>5</sup> The heterogeneity of network era audiences' psychographic features and tastes contributed to the compelling nature of the cultural forum model and similar media theories. The scope reached by television content made early arguments for its significance highly compelling because of its status as such a widely shared media form.

The second assertion of the cultural forum model is that as a medium, television provides a space for the negotiation and discussion of ideological positions. This tenet is characteristic of British cultural studies theory in its allowance for even corporatized mass media content to be the site of contradictory and complex ideological messages.<sup>6</sup> Of television, Newcomb and Hirsch write: 'In its role as central cultural medium it presents a multiplicity of meanings rather than a monolithic dominant point of view'.<sup>7</sup> Relatedly, the authors also assert that television 'does not present firm ideological conclusions – despite its *formal* conclusions – so much as it *comments on* ideological problems'.<sup>8</sup> In this way the forum model diverges from other foundational scholarship that asserts a more powerful and singular voice for television in perpetuating dominant ideology.

The final assertion of the cultural forum model particularly relevant to the reconsideration I provide here is its emphasis on human interaction with television as a process. Newcomb and Hirsch stress that television must be considered beyond isolated utterances of episodes, days or series, but as a 'whole system that presents a mass audience with the range and variety of ideas and ideologies inherent in American culture'.<sup>9</sup> This broad understanding of television as an entity more encompassing than a single viewing experience, or as an object of study that cannot be adequately minimized to a single series or set of episodes, is particularly valuable to the questions considered by academic critics. This assertion suggests the need to deliberate upon the notion of television units, which becomes particularly crucial in the post-network era. The authors' attention to understanding television through ritualistic views of communication is also relevant here and reasserts a conception of television content as process rather than object.

This emphasis on understanding the relationship between television and culture as a process is similar to the theory of television as 'working through' proposed by Ellis.<sup>10</sup> Ellis's recent work presents a thorough reconsideration of the theoretical consequences of television's changes to date, yet he does not directly explore the consequences of the redistribution of audiences (perhaps because this has not yet occurred as significantly in the British context). Ellis notes that

11 Ibid, p. 78.

12 Ibid, p. 72.

'Television can be seen as a vast mechanism for processing the material of the witnessed world into more narrativized, explained forms', which is an assertion similar to that argued by the cultural forum and supports the argument presented here.<sup>11</sup> Ellis does acknowledge that the breadth of content that audiences now choose from diminishes the social importance of any programme, but he does not address how this might be incorporated into theorizing the 'social forum' that television creates.<sup>12</sup> 'Working through' may describe the *process* of meaning making, but it is now the case that diverse populations work through markedly different content and ideas as a result of substantial variance in the television content that serves as stimuli. By interrogating our assumptions of television's scope and selecting units of analysis relevant to the institutional context that we study, models such as the cultural forum can be retheorized to account for the disparity in viewing now common.

### US television's changed institutional environment

The cultural forum model assumes the operations of the network era of US television, a time during which only three networks competed for the attention of viewers. From the wide-scale availability of television from the early 1950s to the late 1970s, networks ABC, CBS and NBC provided viewers' only choice.<sup>13</sup> In this three-way race, most series had to draw more than 30% of those watching television to remain on the air, and successful series might attract as much as 40% of the audience. Although the level of television viewing among the population has remained relatively constant and even increased, viewers now choose from many more options. The gradual distribution of cable first altered the range of options for many viewers. In 1980 only 19.9% of households subscribed to cable; a figure that grew to 50% by 1988. In 2004, more than 85% of US households received channels either by cable or satellite,<sup>14</sup> and those homes received an average of one hundred channels.<sup>15</sup>

For those who receive programming via cable or satellite, as well as those still receiving signals over the air, additional broadcast competitors also changed the terrain and expanded programme offerings. Fox first began broadcasting in 1986, and networks The WB and UPN emerged a decade later. The development of all of these new programming outlets has gradually eroded the mass audience. Where 90% of those watching television watched broadcast networks at the beginning of the 1980s, by the decade's end the figure amounted to only 64% due to increased viewership of cable networks.<sup>16</sup> Network share continued to decline during the 1990s, although not at such a sharp rate; by 2002–2003, the seven broadcast networks and the advertising-supported cable networks both claimed a 50% audience share, with cable lagging by only two-tenths of one ratings point.<sup>17</sup>

Examining changes in the ratings of the thirty most viewed shows

13 The exceptions were independent stations (those not affiliated with a network), and public stations whose formal structure was established in 1967 and counted approximately 250 stations nationwide. See Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: a Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), p. 232.

14 Initiative Media, *Today in National Television*, 9 April 2004.

15 Nielsen Media Research, *TV Audience* (New York, NY: Nielsen Media Research, 2003).

16 John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 11.

17 Stephanie Spady, 'Primetime update: 2002–03 full broadcast year', *Media Insights: MAGNA Global USA*, 24 September 2003.

18 Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2003), pp. 1455–72.

19 For example, the cost to advertisers to reach a thousand viewers (CPM) averaged \$15 on broadcast while only \$9 on cable. Steve McClellan, 'Discovery challenge', *Broadcasting & Cable*, 18 November 2002, pp. 18–20, p. 18. Also see John M. Higgins and Allison Romano, 'Cheaper by the thousand', *Broadcasting & Cable*, 4 February 2002, pp. 20–28.

provides another way to quantify the change in viewing. In the network era of three dominant US networks, the top thirty programmes earned ratings between twenty and thirty, a number that indicates the percentage of households with televisions who were watching that programme. For example, in the 1959–60 season, *Gunsmoke* was the most watched programme and drew an average rating of 40.3, while *The Perry Como Show* and *Lassie* tied for twenty-ninth with a rating of 23.1. By the 1998–99 season, a point by which a transition to a post-network era was evident, the highest rated series earned a 17.8 rating (*ER*), while a programme could rank in the top thirty with a rating of nine. In 2002–03, the most watched series (*CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*) earned a 16.3 rating and the thirtieth-placed show rated only 7.7.<sup>18</sup>

It is not that some other giant emerged to supplant the dominant place of the once invulnerable Big Three networks, but instead down to the steady assault of a plurality of Lilliputians. Drawing 2% of viewers remains a noteworthy accomplishment for many cable networks, but that 2% multiplied by ten networks and the 1% drawn by another ten now adds up to a significant absence of broadcast viewers. Fortuitously for the Big Three, many advertisers still seek to use their television dollars to reach the widest possible audience with a single advertisement, which has prevented the broadcast networks from seeing their advertising rates substantially compromised by the competition.<sup>19</sup> With broadcast erosion continuing, however, it is only a matter of time until advertisers flee in greater numbers to the substantially lower cost per thousand viewers available on cable.

Other adjustments suggesting the transition to a post-network era also exist, but are less relevant to reevaluating the utility of the cultural forum model as a theoretical base for the critical study of television. The establishment of three additional broadcast networks and the foothold gained by a multitude of cable networks suggest that assumptions about the scope of particular television programmes are now in question. The post-network era directly alters the conditions upon which the model's first assertion is based, but the degree to which this first assertion serves as a linchpin also calls the others into question. The utility of the cultural forum model is not lost; however, the post-network transition does require attention be paid to how it is applied and increased emphasis on its other assertions.

### Reconsidering post-network us television as a cultural forum

The most basic question that begins this inquiry then is whether television truly does continue to provide a cultural forum given the extent of audience dispersion in the post-network era. The model takes 'television' as its object of study, an entity that at one time seemed coherent and comprehensible when limited to three outlets. The alterations of the post-network era, however, challenge previous understandings of 'television' so that a shared definition is less clear.



Addressing the continued viability of the cultural forum model and considering 'what is "television" in the post-network era' are not esoteric theoretical exercises lacking practical use. Refining theoretical tools better enables us to address industrial and policy questions that bear material consequences. Reassessing foundational models and understandings of the relationships between cultural texts, their institutional creators and the society that receives them is just as important as work attempting to explain and theorize new developments. Critical perspectives must acknowledge how the object of study has changed because the adjustments may make once valuable topics and lines of inquiry increasingly irrelevant. The significance of a single television series, if studied with an emphasis on its cultural or social contribution, decreases if it is not widely shared. There are vast and varied programming options available in the post-network era, but a show viewed only by one million viewers requires a different framework for analysis than one viewed in the same era by eight million, or a series viewed by twenty million in the network era. With the ample variation in audience size that now exists, we must be careful to address these variations and not assume all television content to be equivalently significant, particularly when inquiries centre on ideological contributions.

On some level it is readily apparent that few if any television series airing currently – or even in the 1990s – could be said to have enacted a cultural forum in the same way as series such as *Father Knows Best* from the 1950s, *All in the Family* from the 1970s, or *The Cosby Show* which ran from 1984 to 1992. Of course post-network series continue to perform the cultural forum process for the audience members viewing them, but they are decreasingly seen by mass and heterogeneous audiences. The situation in the post-network era is reminiscent of the adage questioning whether a tree falls in the forest if there is no one there to hear the sound. With so many other options available, it is increasingly unlikely that ideologically polarized audiences view the same series, particularly those known for transcending dominant norms. For example, it seems reasonable to expect that the audience of a show such as *Queer as Folk* (2000–) is a self-selected niche that deliberately seeks out specific non-mainstream content, making the audience and its relationship to programming very different than in the network era.

So if a series or aspect of television presents a view contradicting or negotiating dominant ideological perspectives, and no one but those critical of the dominant ideology sees it, is its challenge to hegemony diminished? What can *Queer as Folk* accomplish if the audience's knowledge of the series leads homophobes to ignore it? The niche-specific audience that makes such a show possible arguably also prevents it from enacting the consciousness-raising some have suggested a series such as *All in the Family* achieved.<sup>20</sup> In another case, media critics often posited that an increase in the depictions of

<sup>20</sup> See Janet Staiger, *Blockbuster TV* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), p. 193 fn. 60, for a review of this research.

21 See, among many other journalistic accounts, James Sterngold, 'A racial divide widens on network TV', *The New York Times*, 29 December 1998, p. A1.

22 Michael Curtin, 'Feminine desire in the age of satellite television', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 49, no. 2 (1999), pp. 55–70, p. 60.

23 Michael Curtin, 'On edge: culture industries in the neo-network era', in Richard Ohmann, Gage Averill, Michael Curtin, David Shumway and Elizabeth Traube (eds), *Making and Selling Culture* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), pp. 181–202.

24 David Hesmondhalgh, *The Culture Industries* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 229.

African-Americans on television would help decrease racism and ethnic prejudice within society. The number of black characters and roles have increased since the 1980s, but consequences of the post-network era on audience composition call into question earlier theories about the social tolerance such a presence would indicate. Although the number of US situation comedies featuring African-American casts increased throughout the 1990s, comedy audiences simultaneously became segregated alongside the bifurcation of sitcom casts.<sup>21</sup> The increasing number of comedies starring black actors arguably has not resulted in a corresponding increase in those images and stories being seen by white audiences. Network-era standards of relevance and significance do us disservice in a changed industrial context if analyses do not account for institutional alterations.

A model for adapting to the adjusted industry logic appears if we look to programmers and executives in the television industry. As Michael Curtin notes, 'industry discourse about the mass audience no longer refers to one simultaneous experience so much as a shared asynchronous cultural milieu'.<sup>22</sup> The industry has adjusted its strategies in response to the multiplicity of programme providers so that competitors now seek both the broad blockbuster hit *and* the niche success with clearly defined 'edge'.<sup>23</sup> Television networks have responded with original-run repurposing (airing series on both broadcast and cable networks during the series' first run), by measuring audiences based on the multiple airings of the show rather than single airings, and by closely watching for audience overlap across various networks and ways to expand these crossover audiences. Many practices and standards of the network era continue to operate, others have been adjusted, and others yet eliminated and replaced to respond to the dynamic nature of the period.

As a medium, television retains its status as the primary storyteller in US society (at least as of 2004), but the multitude of content now available makes it impossible to speak of television in generalities. The fact that audiences have fragmented among various networks and programmes requires that critics revise the scope of their analyses in an effort to respond to the adjusted status of the forum. As David Hesmondhalgh notes, 'digital television' (and I would suggest the broader post-network related changes) 'may mean that individual channels and programmes have less public impact and power than in the analogue era'.<sup>24</sup> Although he uses this as a reason to emphasize the power now held by the process of circulation in the circuit of culture, textual analysis remains informative if based in theories that account for the specificity of the post-network era. This seems to make individual series and networks less significant and requires us to search for trends, discourses, and representations that occur across networks and series. This assertion does not contradict the forum model as it was written – the emphasis on cross-programme analysis supported by the 'viewing strip' certainly suggests a comprehensive analysis – but more



25 See Newcomb, 'On the dialogic aspects', pp. 44–9; Horace Newcomb, 'One night of prime time: an analysis of television's multiple voices', in James Carey (ed.), *Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), pp. 88–112.

has been made of the scope and space for negotiation aspects in the model's application.<sup>25</sup> The post-network era requires an emphasis on definitions of television stressing the breadth of content available and the notion of television viewing as a process that is not isolatable to a single moment, episode or series, instead of the importance of television based on its scope. Adding this emphasis to the application of the forum model does require that those using it subsequently reassess how they theorize the operation of power.

Below I will illustrate how the cultural forum model still provides a valuable framework for analyzing the contribution of television texts to the construction and circulation of ideology and the cultural negotiation of ideas and values, particularly if we account for adjustments in the programming environment. The cultural forum model remains of great value if we define television as it now exists as a diffuse medium, rather than narrowly confined to an individual series, episode or similar unit. Understanding that we can only speak of an aspect of television – not television as a whole – and that we must comprehend the breadth of television, yet speak of it with specificity, helps reintroduce the pervasiveness of its messages that now reach a more narrow scope at the level of the individual programme.

### 9/11-related discourses in dramatic fictional television

Many media critics focused their analyses on news media in the weeks and months following the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, but few have acknowledged the negotiation of ideas, fears and values evident across a range of dramatic fictional television series. This case provides a prime example of the limitations of using the cultural forum as a foundation for analyzing the ideological contribution of textual content – if only considering a single text. Such an approach may have been adequate in the network era of television production and reception, but in the post-network era such isolated examinations fall short of indicating anything beyond the series or episode in question and do not comment on the significance of television as a component of the culture industry, as much of such scholarship often suggests. When examining a topic or theme in the post-network era we must cast our nets wider so that we allow the range of content produced to determine the boundaries of our inquiry instead of imposing limitations that may disqualify our statements. Even then, our analyses speak only of the aspect we examine, in this case dramatic television series in the 2001–2002 season, and we must seriously deliberate before asserting that our findings can be considered representative of anything larger.

During the eight months from October 2001 to May 2002, television audiences could find sophisticated stories linked implicitly and sometimes explicitly to the disastrous events of 11 September 2001,

and the pain, fear and anxiety that these events created, in some twelve series spread across seven networks. These stories were mostly stand-alone episodes (not part of ongoing serial storylines), nevertheless unobtrusively motivated by the franchise or setting of the series. In most cases these episodes were not promoted as exceptional, but appeared unannounced within the regular flow of prime-time television. I did not search out these episodes, at least not initially, but as they increasingly appeared in my regular viewing I started to check episode guides of series I thought likely to have accommodated the dominant themes and intentionally sought out the last few shows that had *not* been part of my regular viewing routine. I mention this because it serves as such a spontaneous illustration of the cultural forum model at its most precise. These multiple and contradictory narratives emerged in an unintentional and unorganized manner. The preponderance of various themes appeared because of an eruption of cultural sentiment rather than a planned agenda, with media outlets not leading so much as responding to broader cultural events and attitudes that were unspoken or between the lines of news coverage and personal conversations. The episodes are exceptionally varied in their narrative strategies, contexts, ideological positions and emphases, although a few distinctive motifs emerge. The result was a far more vibrant discussion and exploration of post-9/11 fears, policies and uncertainties than transpired in nonfictional television content.

### Negotiations in police procedural narratives

*The District*, *Law & Order*, *NYPD Blue*, *Third Watch* and *The Division* are all, at least in part, police procedural franchises that devoted either episodes or an episodic plotline to a motif related to post-9/11 events. In most cases these stories dealt with issues related to stereotyping, which often emerged as an element of police profiling procedures or in the selection of a victim. I will address only an episode of two different series in substantial depth here, but these narratives must be understood as part of a broader set of stories and series. Instead, I could have chosen to focus on the post-9/11 stories told through the courtrooms of *Family Law*, *The Practice*, *Law & Order* and a court-style debate in *Boston Public*; addressed the narratives emerging from a classroom setting in *The Education of Max Bickford*, *Boston Public* and *The West Wing*; or considered how the events were explicitly negotiated within familial contexts in *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* and *American Family*. The wide-ranging approach I am arguing for could only be accomplished by considering all of these series' narratives, which remains a future task. Focusing on the stories emerging in just one type of series serves to illustrate my point and suggests the need for inclusive examinations when rooting work in a cultural forum foundation.

The episode of *The District* titled 'Twist of Hate' (CBS, tx 26 January 2002) is arguably the most comprehensive of the police

26 Curiously, *The Division* episode 'Before the Deluge' (Lifetime, tx 7 August 2002) begins similarly. The officers respond to the shooting of an Arab-American shopowner, which is immediately followed by the murder of female rabbi in a temple in the same neighbourhood. *The Division* episode then shifts into a hate crime narrative with a member of multiple white supremacist groups ultimately implicated in the crimes. This story is no more about hatred against Arab-Americans than any other group, but its initial similarity in plot and inclusion of an Arab-American victim make it a significant note in assessing the broader debate enacted within the televisual cultural forum.

27 Leaders of the Muslim, Jewish, and religious black communities squabble throughout the episode because they feel the group they represent is being underserved by the police.

procedural narratives, but the density of interrelated stories also makes it somewhat incomprehensible. The episode opens with the police investigating vandalism at a mosque, a crime that is followed the next night with the murder of a rabbi, and then the beating of a black man.<sup>26</sup> Throughout their investigation, various detectives speak from positions of ethnic bias, publicly negotiating many of the racist assumptions circulating in post-9/11 US society. The police investigation reveals that the attacks on the rabbi and the black man were the work of a single member of a hate group, who admits killing 'the Jew' and the 'black' to make it look like the 'towel heads' had done it. The police chief ultimately discovers that the mosque vandalism was the work of the mosque's president, Omar Khalid, who sought to gain popular sympathy and more police protection. His actions have personal consequences, however, as his daughter gets caught in a violent frenzy resulting from protests outside the mosque and ends up in hospital.

The script is loaded with rapid-fire rhetoric among feuding ethnic groups and far more direct statements of prejudice than are common in public discourse.<sup>27</sup> Bald statements of bias ('I am not a racist, I am a realist'; 'If a Christian bombs an abortion clinic then all Christians are fanatics'; 'Christians aren't why police are out guarding airports, dams, and bridges') are never interrogated, but rather unintelligibly accumulate amidst secondary plots. One subplot also initially suggests a hate crime against the police chief's black assistant, which is later revealed as a non-racially motivated boys' prank. Adding to the density of hate crime discourse, two detectives discuss their assessments of the racial situation throughout the episode: Debreno (a white detective) suggests that Page (a black detective) exhibits racist behaviour towards Arab-Americans. The episode reveals the root of this ethnic distrust to be an event Page witnessed while serving in Operation Desert Storm: a sixteen-year-old Saudi Arabian girl killed by her father to restore honour to her family after she was caught running away with a married man.

This complex episode includes too many contradictory perspectives to make much sense, particularly as the narrative moves too fast to allow viewers time to reconsider their initial assumptions after learning that Khalid was responsible for the mosque bombing. The episode overdetermines its connection to the post-9/11 world by including a multitude of signifiers in the central plotline as well as the subplots – notably a storyline about auditions to fill an empty position on the police choir, which provides narrative justification for the episode to conclude with a large a cappella men's choir (in uniform) singing 'Impossible Dream' in front of an enormous American flag. Although appearing to be a part of the post-9/11 dramatic negotiations, 'Twist of Hate' ultimately proves to be a different sort of show than others that use their narrative to comment on resulting cultural changes. Where most of the other dramatic episodes engaging post-9/11 discourse do so with a voice that clearly seeks to advance a perspective or encourage

consideration of the resulting environment of fear, *The District* episode uses the 9/11 motif more as a plot catalyst with an uncertain or at least ambivalent sentiment. Nevertheless, its use of so many relevant signifiers makes it pertinent and marks it as part of the cultural negotiation.

The multiple plots and subplots, bombastic rhetoric, and the complicated prospect of who was to blame makes it difficult to discern a clear ideological agenda. In one sense the story argues for the importance of peace among subordinated groups (as opposed to killing each other off to the benefit of white extremists), but the revelation of Khalid's complicity at the end of the episode undercuts much of the previous narrative, suggesting the episode sought to offer an anti-Arab-American sentiment along the lines of 'they are bringing this on themselves'. Yet, assessing the entire episode, including initial sympathy with the Arab-American characters, makes such a reading tenuous. The abrupt conclusion perhaps allows the true ramification of this new information to pass without much consideration; but at some level Khalid's actions are to blame for the rabbi's death, the black man's beating, and for creating the level of tension that led to his daughter's assault. Ultimately, I suspect most viewers were left with a sense of confusion from the repeated narrative contradictions.

Importantly, a full episode need not be devoted to post-9/11 themes for complex storytelling to take place. The earliest police procedural narrative to air was a secondary story in the *NYPD Blue* episode 'Baby Love' (ABC, tx 4 December 2001), in which detectives Medavoy and Jones are called to the scene of an arson attack at a television store owned by two Arab-American brothers. The story follows the detectives' search for the arsonist and conflict with the storeowners who believe the detectives' initial lack of success results from a half-hearted effort because the victims are Arab-American.

This episode also negotiates contemporary tensions by giving public voice to racist statements, but in a manner of critique not advance. When the detectives interrogate the suspect they sympathize with him, suggesting they too believe that 'those people don't belong here anymore' in order to lead him to implicate himself. In the last relevant scene of the episode, Jones discusses his discomfort with using racist rhetoric to motivate the suspect's confession with girlfriend A.D.A. Haywood.<sup>28</sup> She reassures him by saying, 'You're not racist, you're human. There's what goes through your head and what shows in your actions. That's the difference', to which Jones responds, 'Yeah, well I don't like it going through my head, period. It sure as hell wasn't there before September 11th.'

The episode also includes a thought-provoking scene in which the son of one of the storeowners visits the squad room to apologize for his father's and uncle's distrust of the police and accusations of police racism. Medavoy returns the apology and the boy then asks the precinct room in general, 'What can we do, 'cos my family has lived here for

<sup>28</sup> It may be relevant for non-viewers to know that Haywood and Jones are African-American.

thirty years. I was born here. We're Americans.' Although the question appears rhetorical, Sipowicz responds by noting, 'There were times in this country when it wasn't a big plus to be Japanese or German', and Jones adds, 'or black'. The scene concludes with Sipowicz offering the somewhat empty solution that, 'It'll pass. Hang in there.'

Despite the less central status of this plotline in the overall narrative of the episode, and the comparative avoidance of symbolic language and rhetoric, this episode provides an examination with considerable emotional depth. Rather than the more theoretical debate of due process erosion that emerges from *The District*'s initial suspicion of an Arab-American in the rabbi's beating, the plotline emphasizes personal struggles and stories. The Arab-American families are highly sympathetic in their plight of being considered American one day and the target of suspicion and hate the next. Sipowicz's advice of 'hang in there' seems empty, but it is the most truthful suggestion that could be offered given the historical context. The decision to include the discussion between Jones and Haywood is significant, as it is entirely superfluous to the narrative and provides a very personalized reaction to the character's internal struggle with the overnight birth of an ethnicity-based stereotype. Haywood's separation of what is thought and what is done as different components of racism is provocative, and accessible to audience members who also may be struggling with the thoughts Jones acknowledges.

In describing *NYPD Blue*'s treatment as emphasizing personal struggles and stories, I do not mean to perpetuate a hierarchical valuation in which stories that produce institutional solutions are more progressive than stories offering solutions at the individual level.<sup>29</sup> The contribution of the *NYPD Blue* episode and many of the other narratives results from their ability to give a face to the consequences of abstract policy issues. For example, both *The Practice* and *Family Law* create exceptionally similar episodes dealing with the detainment of Arab-American men on vague and tenuous grounds (other than their ethnic identity). The humanity with which the series construct the characters' suffering from due process erosion indicates how people are affected by policy dictums coded in political rhetoric and delivered by government officials. Updates about new governmental policies may seem 'natural' and 'commonsense' when delivered as decontextualized news items, but posing narratives which encourage audience identification with the victims enables a different kind of understanding.<sup>30</sup>

Other series with police procedural components also incorporated 9/11 themes. *Third Watch* constructed companion episodes, the first set on September 10th so that it concludes with the beginning of the Twin Tower disaster ('September 11th', NBC, tx 22 November 2001). The subsequent episode, set ten days later on September 21st, depicts the officers exhausted from twelve-hour shifts and somewhat dumbstruck by the support and respect afforded by the people of New York ('After

29 See for example, Todd Gitlin, 'Prime time ideology: the hegemonic process in television entertainment', in Newcomb (ed.), *Television: the Critical View*, pp. 516–36.

30 Admittedly, narratives also could be constructed to support policies such as due process erosion, but significantly, this has not been the case.

Time', NBC, tx 29 November 2001). This normally action-driven show focuses on more personal stories in this episode, with plot time spent following officers through their interactions with each other and family, emphasizing their conversations about their fears and reevaluations of their careers.

*Law & Order* too has incorporated post-9/11 themes into various episodes, although the series tends to focus on these issues more in the courtroom drama than the initial police procedural part of the story. In cases when 9/11 themes emerged in the detective work of Briscoe and Green, it often resulted from discussions about the racial profiling of suspects. As in the episode of *The District*, in 'Patriot' (NBC, tx 22 May 2002), the detectives investigate the murder of an Arab-American man and find themselves with evidence now considered suspicious because of the man's ethnic identity. Specifically, they find him to have much more money than they would suspect reasonable for his salary as a mechanic, and they struggle with suspicions that he might be a 'sleeper' agent of a terrorist group. Briscoe (a white detective) expresses ethnic prejudice, which leads Green (a black detective) to remind him that such thinking is what leads officers to pull over Green when he is not driving a police vehicle. The detectives continue the conversation about the 'dirty little secret' of police work (racial profiling) with their lieutenant. Racial profiling-themed stories had appeared frequently in police procedural narratives prior to 9/11, but the new context of Arab-Americans as the primary victims of this practice allowed a reworking of these stories with bias assumptions and stereotypes that had been previously articulated in relation to discrimination against African-Americans.

Across all of the 9/11-themed narratives (not just those set in police procedural stories), motifs about privacy erosion, stereotyping, social tolerance, racial profiling, due process violations, the changed social reality and options for activism recur with varying frequency. Research focused on textual analysis of one of these motifs or the discourse produced in a certain type of series would most likely indicate common themes and discrepant foci. In the police procedural narratives considered here, stories with themes related to racial profiling and stereotypes are the most common, although it is important to note the differences and similarities through which writers deploy these stories. The primary argument I seek to make with this example is the importance of casting a broad enough net when selecting texts and making arguments about content. Had I only considered *The District's* episode as representative of 'television's' treatment of post 9/11 discourse, I could have made assumptions really only true of an isolated series and episode.<sup>31</sup>

31 Had her argument been different, Isabelle Freda's consideration of an episode of *The West Wing* dealing with post-9/11 discourse would have suffered from such assumptions. Isabelle Freda, 'Survivors in *The West Wing*: 9/11 and the United States of emergency', in Wheeler Winston Dixon (ed.), *Film and Television After 9/11* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), pp. 226–46.



## Conclusion

The fraction of 9/11-themed shows considered here begins to suggest the various ways this event and its cultural consequences have been transmitted, negotiated and shared. Again, I emphasize that this example only includes one set of narratives, and a larger project incorporating legal, family and school-based dramas would indicate a far broader range of stories. The police procedural example is illustrative not only of multiplicity and subtle variation, but also in terms of accumulation. Indeed, this example takes textual negotiation beyond that which occurs in a single text to an ongoing experience of new narratives that might lead viewers to reconsider previous opinions and views. Audience members might make sense of the first 9/11 narrative they view in relation to personal beliefs and news media information, but the second episode then converses with the first, and so on.<sup>32</sup>

It is not likely that audiences see all of the variations provided by multiple series' treatments of a specific issue. With viewing distributed across a broad range of channel options, it is difficult to speculate about how many or even which types of shows a single audience member is likely to encounter and in what order. My viewing of narrative fiction may be much broader than most audience members, since I watch shows I enjoy as well as a great many that I might not view if my vocation were different. I happened to see *The District* episode as a rerun, which aired the day before *The Division* episode (see fn. 26). The two narratives (which are initially very similar) consequently merged, or seemed in conversation with each other, to a degree unlikely had I seen *The District* episode during its original airing seven months earlier; nor would the scenario have been so impressive if I had only seen one of the episodes.

As the transition to a post-network era initiates a shift towards multiple plays of episodes through practices such as original-run repurposing and technologies such as digital video recorders and video on demand, which decrease live viewing, it becomes impossible to estimate when and in what order audiences view specific content, even of the most popular shows. Much valuable audience research might investigate these questions and empirically study whether and how audiences negotiate the ideas in multiple series' material. The cultural forum model was able to assume a much less complicated process of circulation when constructing its textual analyses in the network era.

The example of 9/11 narratives offers a particularly politically-loaded context, but it is necessary to acknowledge that cross-text exploration of ideas also occurs for less mainstream and ideologically significant stories. For example, in earlier thinking on this topic I noticed that many of the medical shows that I watch, specifically *ER*, *Strong Medicine* and *Providence*, offered episodes exploring Munchhausen Syndrome by Proxy. A similar cross-text analysis might

<sup>32</sup> Newcomb, 'On the dialogic aspects', pp. 44–9.

be done for episodes on racial profiling in police procedural narratives or other 'ripped from the headlines' stories that different programmes incorporate. Although the example I use here is quite exceptional in its centrality to material political and ideological concerns, this approach is useful across a broad range of topics and discourses.

The assertions of the cultural forum model remain effective for considering programming during this transition to a post-network era, particularly when it is used with recognition of how the television industry and the experience of being a television viewer have changed and how these adjustments continue. The dynamic nature of contemporary institutional processes requires constant reassessment of the foundational theories and assumptions that underpin critical media work. The argument and analysis presented here examines only one of many foundational theoretical perspectives; it is likely that reconsidering others might also prove useful, while others might easily adapt to different institutional contexts.

Most scholarship employing the cultural forum emphasizes its allowance for the presence of contradictory or varying content with a suggestion that this diversity of ideas provides a space for negotiation. Characteristics of the post-network era require that critics de-emphasize the model's theorization of television's scope, but instead accentuate the multiplicity of series and content it makes available. The process of content dissemination becomes more relevant in the post-network era, while the deliberate selection of units of analysis becomes crucial to producing valid scholarship. In some ways, the post-network multiplicity of television content enhances the relevance of the cultural forum model, because the multiplicity of channels expands the 'forum' in significant ways. Admittedly, the technology should not be viewed as determinant, but we can look to research on audiences to confirm that audiences do engage a broader range of channels than the network-era three. Similarly, viewing schedules provide evidence of the greater variety of forms and content available, despite increasingly centralized ownership and various repurposing strategies. In some situations the model still operates effectively. Networks targeting specific sub-populations still operate in the tradition of the forum, although only among a particular and homogeneous population, as in the case of Nickelodeon among children and MTV among teens.

Other aspects of the forum model diminish in their importance in this new context. As suggested here, scope must be carefully attended to in determining units of analysis, and although the viewing strip remains a useful theoretical concept, actually exploring the viewing sequence of a particular viewer tells us little about the larger television phenomenon, because these strips have become so individualized with the multiplicity of options available (although, as Newcomb notes, some eighty-one possibilities were available on a given night even in the network era).<sup>33</sup> Relatedly, the changes of the post-network era alter the position of television in what Bernard Mieghe theorized as three logics

33 Newcomb, 'One night', p. 91.

underlying the production of culture and information.<sup>34</sup> In the late 1980s context of his writing, Miege could argue that television fitted into a 'flow model', which is characteristic of media manifesting continuity, a range of diffusion, and ephemerality. Contemporary US television is increasingly representative of an alternative model – what Miege identifies as a 'publishing model'. Industries operating under the logic of the publishing model typically feature a great uncertainty in product success and respond to this uncertainty by producing a large catalogue of texts to disperse risk and by segmenting audiences with content tailored to specific tastes. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, US television is best understood as demonstrating attributes that blend the flow and publishing models. The shift in the application of Miege's models illustrates another example of how theoretical models must be refined and reconceptualized as the object of study evolves.

The adjustments in theories the post-network era requires of frameworks such as the cultural forum or Miege's models indicate the limitations and, ultimately, the inadequacy of adopting grand, macro-level theoretical frameworks to explain the relationships between commercial cultural industries and the ideological content of their textual products. The intricate variations of these industries are far too complex; the dynamic nature of their organizational logic prevents theories about their operation that assume that they 'always' or 'never' do anything, however elegant, from attending to the variations of their practice.

As an object of study, US television has changed considerably since the creation of many of the foundational theories through which it is commonly understood. Just as the frameworks of analysis have varied in response to shifts in assumptions about the operation of media in society, they must adjust in response to significant developments and alterations in the media themselves. By the mid 1990s, the US television industry had removed itself from the industrial logic that had governed it since its creation. Its evolution into a new emergent logic may not be complete, but the development is significant enough that residual frameworks for understanding the medium require updating and revision. Network-era models and frameworks will not necessarily become obsolete, but the validity of the assumptions upon which they were built will require reconsideration.