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# Post-network audiences and cable crime drama

## ABSTRACT

1. *The proliferation of original programming by cable networks and the increasing*  
 2. *availability of digital video recorders, video-on-demand services and broadband*  
 3. *Internet access has led many observers to assert that American television is in the*  
 4. *midst of its 'third golden age'. Such claims rely heavily on the recent prominence*  
 5. *of cable crime drama. Yet, to date, there is little scholarship addressing TV's rising*  
 6. *cultural status from the perspective of audiences. Using qualitative data gathered*  
 7. *from 31 respondents (ages 18–34), this article focuses on viewers' relationships with*  
 8. *select crime dramas appearing on basic cable (advertiser-supported) and premium*  
 9. *cable (subscriber-supported) networks and cable omnivores who watch cable crime*  
 10. *dramas produced in a variety of economic contexts. Considering not only what view-*  
 11. *ers watch, but also how they choose to engage with some programmes and not others,*  
 12. *the findings indicate that post-network audience reception practices vary with the*  
 13. *cultural status of televisual texts.*

## INTRODUCTION

16. Scripted original series produced by cable networks are more closely associ-  
 17. ated with American television's elevated cultural status in the post-network era  
 18. than any other type of programming. Frequently, cable crime dramas like *The*  
 19. *Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *The Wire* (2002–2008) are credited with improving  
 20. the overall quality of television content. As Newman and Levine (2012) argue,  
 21. however, the discourses associated with television's 'cultural legitimisation' work  
 22.  
 23.

## KEYWORDS

post-network  
television  
crime dramareception  
analysis  
television studies  
American audiences  
golden age

to distance contemporary texts and viewing practices from the medium's low-status past. Yet, audience research has largely shied away from exploring such issues. To begin filling this gap in the literature, this article focuses on viewers and their relationship to some of the post-network era's most celebrated content – hour-long crime dramas produced by American cable networks.

This analysis begins with a brief consideration of contemporary audience reception research addressing American television audiences. Next, the author describes the historical trajectory of crime drama on American television in relation to the cultural status of the medium. With this past in mind, this article then draws attention to the contours of cable crime drama's contemporary status hierarchies. In this broader cultural and industrial context, the distinction between 'basic' and 'premium' cable shows facilitates audience reception research by limiting the scope of the analysis. Specifically, this research examines audience engagement with nine cable crime dramas: *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *The Wire* (2002–2008), *The Closer* (2005–2012), *Dexter* (2006–2013), *White Collar* (2007–2013), *Burn Notice* (2009–), *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010–), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–2014) and *Homeland* (2011–).

After explaining the process by which these cable crime dramas were selected, describing the methods used to recruit respondents, and detailing the composition of the sample, the research findings are presented in three sections. Among viewers of advertiser-supported cable crime drama, audience reception practices are characterized by attachment to particular characters and the appreciation of episodic narratives. In contrast, two additional modes of engagement are typical among viewers of subscriber-supported cable crime drama. Respondents who watch *Dexter*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Homeland* engage with premium cable drama in ways that mirror basic cable viewers. In contrast, respondents watching *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* distance themselves from low-status network crime drama and low-status mass audiences. Among viewers of both premium and basic cable crime dramas, reception is marked by high levels of familiarity with the genre and the ability to make fine-grain status distinctions in relation to specific textual features. Collectively, these findings highlight the ways in which traditional and post-network modes of engagement coexist. As such, this research adds to the growing body of television studies scholarship that understands watching TV as behaviour situated within the new media environment created by digital technology (Sienkiewicz and Marx 2014).

## RECEPTION RESEARCH AND AMERICAN TELEVISION AUDIENCES

Historically, 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. 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). 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 programme content determined by the networks over which they had no control became able to engage with individual programmes 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

1. to traditional network content exploded as cable channels began produc-  
 2. ing scripted television series. Indeed, since the premiere of *The Sopranos* in  
 3. 1999, the number of scripted series produced for cable channels has increased  
 4. by 1000 per cent (Littleton 2014). As a result of these changes, television's  
 5. cultural status begins to rise leading some observers to declare the arrival of a  
 6. 'third golden age' (Martin 2013).

7. Yet, scholars have not explored audience reception in relation to the medi-  
 8. um's elevated status. In fact, there has been very little audience scholarship  
 9. since the late 1990s. As a consequence of the same industrial and techno-  
 10. logical shifts that resulted in television's rising status, critical audience analy-  
 11. sis relying on qualitative methodologies including ethnographic observation  
 12. and interviews has become increasingly difficult for multiple reasons. First,  
 13. the expansion of cable programming choices limits the degree to which  
 14. researches can rely on audiences to be watching the same shows. Between  
 15. 2002 and 2012, for example, prime-time ratings for broadcast networks fell  
 16. 50 per cent (Stelter 2013).<sup>1</sup> Second, the expansion of broadband Internet  
 17. service and the increasing capabilities offered through mobile devices allow  
 18. viewers to engage with this ever-expanding amount of content in physical  
 19. spaces that are not the home.

20. Among many television scholars, audience research is thought to be too  
 21. difficult as viewer choice and control has increased to such a degree that  
 22. reception can only be conceptualized as having no single behaviour or mode  
 23. of viewing. Some scholars have gone so far as to declare that the concept  
 24. of the audience is no longer useful. According to Jermyn and Holmes (2006)  
 25. the notion of the audience is obsolete, or at least disappearing. Indeed, the  
 26. difficulty of conducting empirical research on contemporary audiences has led  
 27. many to seek alternative avenues for reception analysis. One such alterna-  
 28. tive is examining the construction of fan identities and the creation of content  
 29. based on television texts within fan communities.

30. 'Fan studies' scholarship is largely indebted to Jenkins' (1992) work on  
 31. 'textual poachers'. Building on Michel de Certeau's notion of 'poaching',  
 32. Jenkins argues, 'Fans construct their cultural and social identity through  
 33. borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which  
 34. often go unvoiced within the dominant media' (1992: 23). Following Jenkins,  
 35. fan studies work often suggests the driving force of fandom is the social pleas-  
 36. ure of being part of an accepting community that shares one's passion and  
 37. interests. Research on fans and fandom, however, does not address the status  
 38. of television texts in a context beyond that of fans' affection or lack thereof.  
 39. Furthermore, given that fan behaviour reflects a level of emotional investment  
 40. and knowledge acquisition/performance that is not typical of general audi-  
 41. ences (Couldry 2011), such research cannot speak to the broader issues like  
 42. class, status and power that have historically animated much audience recep-  
 43. tion scholarship (Morley 1980). To begin filling this gap in the literature, this  
 44. article explores the ways in which audience reception differs in relation to  
 45. post-network television's status hierarchies by focusing on viewers' relation-  
 46. ships with hour-long cable crime dramas.

#### 47. **CRIME DRAMA AS GENRE**

48. During the network era (from the early 1950s to the early 1980s), television  
 49. was a domestic medium (watched at home) with limited content produced  
 50. by three over-the-air broadcast networks Responding to the realities of the

1. Television ratings are created by the 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 metres'. Rather than reflecting an actual number of viewers at a given time, ratings are a currency for the economic transactions between advertisers and networks.

2. The term 'network' has multiple connotations in relation to American television. The phrase 'network television', for example, 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 this usage, the term 'network' distinguishes free, over-the-air television from fee-based, cable television. Yet, when used in the phrase 'television network', the term describes any channel. In this case, both NBC and CNN are television networks despite their differing economic and technological foundations.

market, between the early 1950s and the early 1980s, three over-the-air American broadcast networks created content that conformed to the least objectionable programming theory of audience behaviour.<sup>2</sup> This approach was largely based on the belief that the absence of objectionable material was more important to the success of a given programme than the presence of any other textual features. In this industrial context, NBC's *Dragnet* (1951–1959, 1967–1970), which began as a radio programme, came to define the crime drama. In this early police procedural, the police officer is depicted as a public hero and, thus, the legitimate arbiter of moral authority. As Mittell notes, 'One of the representational strategies that *Dragnet* uses to solidify this world-view is the use of overt binary oppositions, such as law versus crime, order versus chaos, and efficient system versus rogue individualism' (2004: 146). Such binaries were consistent with other elements of 1950s culture that served national myths about stability and American contentment. In many ways, it was this ideological fealty to the status quo that characterizes the genre throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Lane 2001).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the narrative focus of crime drama shifted from catching criminals to the daily lives of 'ordinary' cops. In moving away from the morally dichotomous model of the earlier police drama, *Hill Street Blues* (1981–1987) 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 claims the show 'brought something truly different to prime-time television' (1997: 60). Indeed, *Hill Street Blues* was denser and less viewer-friendly than most network-era dramas. More recent shows that rely on this narrative template include *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005) and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (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.

If shows like *NYPD Blue* continued the trend towards more complex crime drama that began with *Hill Street Blues*, then broadcast network crime drama in the post-network era reflects a reversal. Shows like *NCIS* (2003–) and *CSI* (2000–2015) demonstrate 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). Like Gitlin's (1987) arguments regarding network era television more broadly, contemporary scholars understand network crime dramas in ideological terms. As Hohenstein 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 (2009: 67). Yet, in spite of declining ratings (Stelter 2013), broadcast network crime dramas are still produced with the intent of building 'coalition' audiences composed of viewers from a variety of demographics.

By the late 1990s, however, the number of available alternatives to broadcast network dramas exploded as cable channels began producing scripted television series intended for niche audiences. Unlike network television that

1. is entirely dependent on revenue from advertisers, cable networks rely on  
2. different economic models. 'Basic' cable networks have two primary reve-  
3. nue streams. The first is advertising. Basic cable networks like FX and TNT  
4. sell time in their programming schedule to advertisers which they fill with  
5. commercials. The second is carriage fees. Cable providers, like Comcast and  
6. Time Warner, sell customers monthly access to a particular set of channels  
7. (the cable bundle). To include a basic cable channel like AMC in its bundle,  
8. cable providers pay AMC 'carriage fees' for the right to carry their program-  
9. ming. The economic model of advertiser-supported cable networks allows  
10. them to profitably produce shows that will only be viewed by 1 per cent of  
11. the available audience (Lotz 2007: 37). In contrast to this economic model,  
12. 'premium' cable networks are subscriber-supported and do not gener-  
13. ate revenue through advertising (although they do through carriage fees).  
14. Instead, customers who pay cable providers for access to a cable bundle can  
15. choose to pay an additional monthly fee. Channels distributed through such  
16. arrangements are collectively called 'premium cable'. Premium cable channels  
17. include: HBO, Showtime, Cinemax and Starz.

18. As a consequence of these economic realities, post-network era cable crime  
19. dramas differ from their generic predecessors and their network contempo-  
20. raries in three significant ways. First, protagonists in cable crime dramas are  
21. no longer exclusively agents of the state, like police officers, or pseudo-agents,  
22. like private detectives. Second, cable crime dramas are often 'anti-heroic'  
23. narratives. Typically, the term refers to the central distinction between tradi-  
24. tional heroes who lack moral flaws and anti-heroes whose moral flaws are  
25. directly related to the unfolding dramatic narrative. Third, post-network cable  
26. crime dramas frequently feature serialized narratives. The long-form storytell-  
27. ing and serialized narratives of original cable series are seen as more engag-  
28. ing, addressing a committed and passionate viewer in relation to episodic  
29. narratives of network procedural dramas. In the last fifteen years, original  
30. hour-long dramas with narratives centred on morally ambiguous, white, male  
31. protagonists have become increasingly common on US cable television.

32. Beyond their ubiquity, the masculine anti-hero is also the character most  
33. closely associated with television's elevated status. Not surprisingly, shows  
34. with such protagonists like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* (2008–  
35. 2013) dominate critical discussions regarding 'the best' television shows  
36. of all-time (Zoller Seitz 2012). Yet, Newman and Levine (2012) argue that  
37. television's 'cultural legitimization' relies on discourses that work to distance  
38. contemporary texts, audiences, and viewing practices from the medium's low-  
39. status past. Using a variety of materials from the popular and trade press,  
40. they demonstrate that 'cultural elites (including journalists, popular critics, TV  
41. creators and executives, and media scholars)' elevate television by investing  
42. 'the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more  
43. established arts and cultural forms' (2012: 7). In this process of selection and  
44. exclusion, television only 'becomes respectable through the elevation of one  
45. concept of the medium at the expense of another' (2012: 13).

46. As such, not all post-network cable crime dramas are equally associ-  
47. ated with claims regarding television's 'third golden age'. In comparison to  
48. the anti-heroic protagonists in premium cable dramas, many protagonists in  
49. basic cable dramas are indistinguishable from those in network dramas. In  
50. addition, many basic cable crime dramas are procedurals that resemble tradi-  
51. tional network content. Not surprisingly, such shows are often panned by  
52. critics. As the cultural legitimacy of post-network television is more closely

associated with some kinds of crime dramas than with others, the next section begins by describing the process by which the distinction between premium (subscriber-supported) and basic (advertiser-supported) is incorporated into this research.

## METHODS AND SELECTION OF CASES

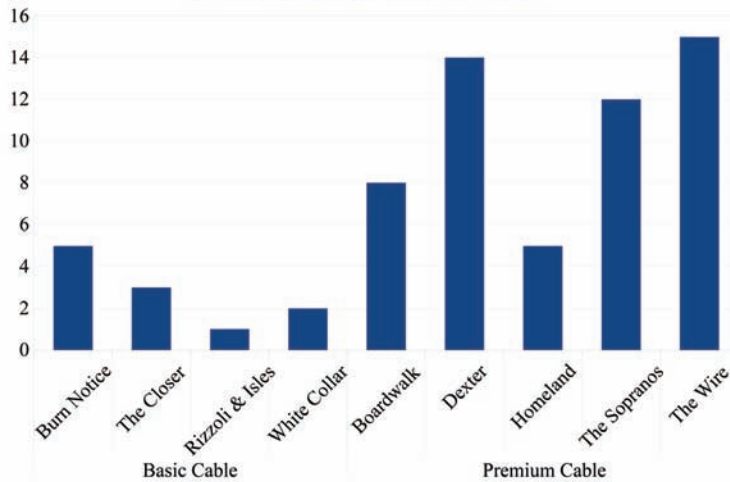
To address the ways in which audience reception of cable crime drama varies, it was necessary to select a small number of shows to represent different contexts of production. Five premium (subscriber-supported) cable shows and five basic (advertiser-supported) cable shows were selected. The premium cable crime dramas included in this research were *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Boardwalk Empire*, *Dexter* and *Homeland*. These shows are some of the most celebrated dramas produced in the post-network era. *The Sopranos* is centred on fictional New Jersey-based Italian American mobster Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini). The show depicts its protagonist's struggle with the competing demands of his home life and the work of organized crime. *The Wire* is centred 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 media. The Showtime series *Dexter* follows eponymous protagonist Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) who is a sociopath and a serial killer masquerading as a 'normal guy' working as a blood spatter expert for the Miami Police Department. Showtime's *Homeland* focuses on Carrie Mathison (played by Claire Danes), a Central Intelligence Agency officer with bipolar disorder. Unlike these other premium cable crime dramas, 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 (Steve Buschemi).

The basic cable crime dramas included in this research were *Burn Notice*, *The Closer*, *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–), *Rizzoli & Isles* and *White Collar*. These shows were selected on the basis of their popularity as measured by Nielsen ratings. With the exception of *Sons of Anarchy*, these crime dramas are significantly lighter in tone and all are more episodic in structure than the premium cable dramas described above. Starring Kyra Sedgwick, *The Closer* is a TNT procedural whose protagonist is Los Angeles Police Department Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson. Brenda sometimes uses deceit and intimidation to persuade a suspect to confess thereby maintaining her reputation as a 'closer'. 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. USA's *White Collar* is centred 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. *Rizzoli & Isles* is a TNT procedural drama featuring police detective Jane Rizzoli (Angie Harmon) and medical examiner Dr Maura Isles (Sasha Alexander). Although they have contrasting personalities and styles, the titular duo is nonetheless able to solve some of Boston's most gruesome crimes.

1. Separate posters were created to recruit viewers of premium and basic  
 2. cable crime dramas. Respondents were recruited in a mid-sized East Coast  
 3. American city in late 2013. Data collection occurred at a variety of physical  
 4. locations depending on individual availability and preference. Interviews last-  
 5. ing between 60 and 90 minutes were digitally recorded and transcribed by the  
 6. author. Field-notes were taken after each interview. A total of 31 respondents  
 7. completed interviews. Nineteen identified as male, twelve identified as female.  
 8. Two respondents identified as African American, three identified as Asian,  
 9. and three identified as Hispanic. The remaining 24 respondents identified as  
 10. white although several identified themselves as members of specific white  
 11. ethnic groups. Two identified as queer. All respondents are young-adults ages  
 12. 18–34. Thirteen respondents have some college experience, eleven respond-  
 13. ents are college graduates and seven respondents have post-graduate degrees.  
 14. Regarding occupation, ten respondents are full-time university students, eight  
 15. respondents are full-time graduate students, ten respondents are white-collar  
 16. workers, and three respondents work in the service/retail sector. All respond-  
 17. ents have been given pseudonyms.

18. As the central narrative unit of crime dramas the post-network era is  
 19. the season, respondents are defined as viewers if they report watching a  
 20. minimum of two complete seasons of a given crime drama. Six individu-  
 21. als responded to the basic cable flyer and completed interviews. None had  
 22. watched sufficient portions of *Sons of Anarchy* to be considered viewers in  
 23. the context of this research. In addition, none of those who responded to the  
 24. basic cable flyer had seen substantive amounts of any premium cable crime  
 25. drama. This is not to say that the basic cable viewers had no experience with  
 26. premium cable content. Rather, their viewing of HBO and Showtime did  
 27. not include the relevant crime dramas. A total of 25 individuals responded  
 28. to the premium cable flyer and completed interviews. Eleven of these indi-  
 29. viduals had no experience with basic cable crime dramas although many  
 30. reported watching other kinds of drama on basic cable networks. Fourteen  
 31. respondents were viewers of both premium and basic cable crime dramas.  
 32.  
 33.  
 34.

Number of Respondents in Sample Defined as Viewers of Selected Cable Crime Dramas



These viewers are cable ‘omnivores’ who engage with crime dramas across the post-network television landscape. In addition to their familiarity with American crime drama, many omnivores are also viewers of crime dramas from international markets.

### BASIC CABLE VIEWERS

Audience reception practices among the six respondents who watch *Burn Notice*, *Covert The Closer*, *Rizzoli & Isles* and *White Collar* share important similarities with network era audiences. These respondents also offer explicit appreciation for textual elements in post-network cable crime drama that resemble network era norms. Describing middle-class women’s reception of soap operas in the network era, Press (1992) observes that these viewers become involved with the interpersonal relationships depicted by identifying with individual characters and situations. A similar set of themes is evident in these respondents’ discussions of their favourite basic cable crime dramas. For example, Bonnie, a 22-year-old medical researcher, addresses the appeal of *Rizzoli & Isles* in terms of the show’s two 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, Bonnie 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.

In addition, these respondents explain their preference for basic cable crime in reference to textual features closely associated with the network era. Specifically, they report enjoying the narrative elements that render each episode distinct. Regarding *Burn Notice*, Kyle, an 18-year-old university student, explains:

I like the, kind of the *MacGyver* [ABC, 195-1992], [*The*] *A-Team* [NBC, 1983–1987] feel of it. I like that [the characters in *Burn Notice*] are given a specific problem, they take on a specific client or whatever, trying to deal with [protagonist] Michael’s own problems, and the way that they navigate that. I find Jeffrey Donovan – the main actor – he has a terrific range of characters that he puts on. Because of being a spy, so he’s able to show off different sides of himself.

Although Kyle is the only respondent to explicitly link post-network basic cable crime drama to its network-era predecessors, the appreciation of episodic narratives is common among all basic cable viewers.

Given the significance of personal identification and the appreciation of episodic narratives, it is not surprising that these respondents do not to make status distinctions between basic cable crime dramas and network crime dramas. Some respondents even prefer the network dramas above cable dramas. When asked if *White Collar* is her favourite, Sophia, a 19-year-old university student, 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



1. drama genre, I really like *Bones* [FOX, 2005–]. I really like *Bones*, because it  
 2. is set in DC, which is awesome and has FBI agents and stuff'. Of the show's  
 3. male and female leads, Sophia says, 'I like Bones [Emily Deschanel] and Booth  
 4. [David Boreanaz]. I feel like they're kind of a funny awkward couple'. In the  
 5. context of American television's 'third golden age', the absence of status  
 6. distinctions among these viewers is notable.

### PREMIUM CABLE VIEWERS

10. As mentioned above, although 25 individuals responded to the premium  
 11. cable flyer, only eleven of these individuals are exclusively viewers of crime  
 12. dramas produced by subscriber-supported networks. Within this group, the  
 13. six viewers of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* are significantly more concerned  
 14. with the cultural status of those crime dramas than are the five viewers of  
 15. *Dexter*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Homeland*. In fact, the *Dexter*, *Boardwalk Empire*  
 16. and *Homeland* viewers are not concerned with status at all. After stating that  
 17. the historical elements of *Boardwalk Empire* initially drew her to the show, I  
 18. asked Dani, a 20-year-old university student, if she thought the show was  
 19. historically accurate. She replies:

21. I can't really say because I don't really know what really happened. So  
 22. ... I think it's probably getting off course. I wouldn't be surprised. It's  
 23. such a big show. I wouldn't be surprised if the writer kind of tweak  
 24. some things.

26. When asked to explain what she means by 'big show', she continues, 'Well,  
 27. I guess it is critically acclaimed at this point. That's kind of what I mean by  
 28. "big show," like that. I don't know if it's popular with people that much. My  
 29. friends don't really watch it'. Yet, when asked if critical acclaim was important  
 30. to her, Dani says, 'Not really, as long as I like it. I don't really care about [criti-  
 31. cal acclaim]'. Zadie, a 22-year-old university student, expresses similar ambiv-  
 32. alence regarding *Dexter*. Knowing the show is often thought to be a rather  
 33. uneven series, I asked if she had a favourite season. Zadie responds:

35. I think I liked season one the best because it dealt with [Dexter's] brother  
 36. and then [Dexter] trying to do it himself. I didn't really like season two. I  
 37. didn't like that one at all – dealing with a random person in his life and  
 38. then out of his life.

40. Regarding later seasons, she continues, '[The show] killed off [Dexter's wife]  
 41. Rita, and then sent the other two [late-season girlfriends] away. I liked them  
 42. interact[ing with Dexter]. I wanted them to interact a little more'. When asked  
 43. if the later seasons reduced the show's standing in her eyes, Zadie seems to  
 44. reject the premise of the question replying, 'I don't know. It's just something  
 45. to watch'.

46. The irrelevance of status for *Dexter*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Homeland* view-  
 47. ers is further confirmed when several respondents claim that their favourite  
 48. crime dramas are network shows. Although she responded to the premium  
 49. cable flyer and watches *Dexter* regularly, Amy says her favourite show is  
 50. *Law and Order: SVU* (1999–). This 22-year-old grant administrator explains,  
 51. 'I really like the characters. I love Olivia [Benson]'. Dani also says that *SVU*  
 52. is her favourite show. Yet, as she explains, 'I watched *SVU* before they took

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3. In an interview with TV Guide, for example, Obama said, 'I think *The Wire* is one of the greatest shows of all time' (Battaglio 2012).

[Detective Elliot] Stabler off and it's not the same now so I just stopped watching it'. For both Amy and Dani, the preference for some crime dramas over others is directly related to their feelings about particular characters. Zadi also says her favourite crime drama is a network show but she explains her preferences in different terms. Describing the most appealing elements of her favourite shows *NCIS*, *Cold Case* (2003–2010) and *Criminal Minds* (2005–), Zadi explains, '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'.

Unlike viewers of *Dexter*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Homeland*, status is very significant for viewers of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. In fact, the audience reception practices of these viewers are largely defined by the degree to which these crime dramas are considered exceptional. Despite having been off-the-air for years, several respondents report that the impetus to watch these HBO shows is a result of their cultural importance. Discussing his interest in *The Sopranos*, Colin, a 27-year-old freelance journalist, says:

I was feeling as though, and it's kind of like why I watch great films, there are so many main street references that come from *The Sopranos*. I was watching it with a friend, an ex-girlfriend, and we were just commenting, 'Is it just us or are there all these *Sopranos* references in culture?'

Ethan, a 22-year-old college student, explains his interest in *The Wire* in similar terms. Referring to one of the many times President Barack Obama publicly praised the HBO drama, he 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'.<sup>3</sup> 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, Ethan asserts that his own behaviour in relation to *The Wire* is exceptional. The assumption underpinning such assertions is that in the context of post-network era television's cultural legitimation, watching 60 hours of *The Wire* in 'a fairly short amount of time' is an act of self-actualization that stands in contrast to the presumably passive and wasteful television viewing of other, unnamed audiences.

Not surprisingly, for viewers of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, the difference between network and cable dramas is a meaningful status distinction. Dane, a 24-year-old graduate student, offers a typical reading. Discussing *CSI*, *Law & Order* (1990–2010) and *NCIS*, he says, 'Maybe this is not fair, but in my head I classify those as [shows] I wouldn't probably enjoy watching that much because, my guess is that the characters don't have as much depth as those in *The Wire*'. When asked about his how he formed this opinion regarding network crime dramas Dane explains, 'One of the shows that my housemate

1. has been watching that would be on in the background is *Bones*. That would  
 2. be an example of a show [that] I equate to *CSI*, or something'. He adds, 'They  
 3. go for the really gruesome murders and they have all this technology that  
 4. probably doesn't exist. For me, it doesn't really fit my taste'. Rather than cele-  
 5. brating premium cable crime dramas, in these instances, respondents deni-  
 6. grate network crime drama to distinguish themselves from audiences who  
 7. remain trapped in the network era.

### 10. OMNIVOROUS CABLE VIEWERS

11. Fourteen of the 25 individuals responding to the premium cable flyer report  
 12. watching both basic and premium cable crime dramas. Compared to the other  
 13. respondents in the sample, these cable omnivores are much more familiar  
 14. with television crime drama as a genre. Although these viewers understand  
 15. network crime drama to be inferior to cable crime drama like the view-  
 16. ers of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* discussed above, there are several distinc-  
 17. tive elements of omnivorous reception practices. First, omnivorous viewers  
 18. frequently invoke discourses of legitimation when discussing premium cable  
 19. shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. According to Lloyd, a 24-year-old soft-  
 20. ware engineer, 'With [series] like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, you feel like  
 21. you're watching a really long movie'. For Rick, a 26-year-old independent  
 22. contractor working in the field human resources specialist, *The Sopranos*' use  
 23. of subtext is particularly notable. He says, 'There's a lot of subtlety to it that I  
 24. really enjoy, in terms of the structure within the plots and within even just the  
 25. cinematography and pacing. I can definitely see parallels that they're drawing  
 26. upon between scenes'. Discussing the medium in broad terms, Katherine, a  
 27. 28-year-old graduate student, asserts, 'I feel like TV is moving in the direc-  
 28. tion of short movies. Or, like miniseries type-things. That is happening more  
 29. and more. That's kind of why I love television so much'. These comments  
 30. indicate that the legitimating discourses Newman and Levine (2012) identify  
 31. among cultural elites like television producers and critics have been taken up  
 32. by portions of the post-network audience.

33. Second, omnivorous viewers use their knowledge of the genre to navigate  
 34. and maintain a complex hierarchy of post-network era crime drama. In fact,  
 35. genre-specific knowledge is used in several consistent ways. Many of the cable  
 36. omnivores in this sample distance themselves from basic cable dramas by  
 37. aligning them with network shows. Katherine, for example, claims to dislike  
 38. 'most procedurals'. She explains:

40. Yeah. I don't know. I think that any drama that is too [episodic] can be  
 41. okay – what is this weeks' story? But you are not progressing forward in  
 42. terms of character development, or whatever else. USA, TNT shows –  
 43. I mean, they can be good. I like some of them more than others. I  
 44. watched *White Collar* for a little while. It was okay [...] My mom loved  
 45. *The Closer*, so I watched some of it too. But I don't know, it was always,  
 46. okay, what is this week's murder? Again, it is like the same thing over  
 47. and over.

49. Although Katherine's dismissive attitude resembles premium cable view-  
 50. ers' dismissive attitudes towards network dramas, her familiarity with basic  
 51. cable dramas stands out. Similarly, Byron, a 26-year-old working for an online  
 52. marketing firm, claims that he tried to watch *White Collar* and 'couldn't do

it'. Regarding *Burn Notice*, he similarly asserts, 'I've tried it, can't do it. It felt too contrived I think'. In addition to distancing themselves from basic cable dramas, omnivorous viewers also report distancing themselves from some premium cable dramas as a given series progresses. Specifically, several respondents identify premium cable shows thought to be overly reliant on particular characters as inferior. Beth, a 22-year-old research assistant, offers a typical example of this saying, '*Dexter* is funny and entertaining, but I wouldn't say it's a good show in the way *The Wire* is a good show'. Claiming that he is 'losing interest' in *Homeland*, Joshua, a 26-year-old graduate student, says, 'I think that it has to just get more and more ridiculous in order to keep going'. Although cultural legitimation '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), the fine-grain distinctions made by cable omnivores also reveal a more complex status hierarchy among premium cable crime dramas.

Third, among omnivorous cable viewers, failure to appreciate the medium's legitimacy is understood as an individual shortcoming. Some respondents express this view in relation to particular cable dramas. For example, Tim claims:

I essentially feel like anyone who cannot watch *The Wire* and enjoy it, or at least make it through all five seasons and understand [...] you don't have to love it, but at least appreciate it for what it is, then I think you are probably going to be a hard person to talk to.

For other respondents, the failure to take television seriously is itself problematic. Discussing television's status relative to film, Katherine claims, 'Any time someone is like, "Oh, movies are so much better than television," – it's like, "No, you are not watching the right TV"'. Among many cable omnivores there was a similar sense that the majority of contemporary audiences make poor television choices. Responding to those claiming 'we're living in a golden age', Joshua counters, 'I don't really feel like that's true'. He explains, 'I mean, there's a lot of crap out there. 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 claims contain elements of traditional anti-television snobbery, nonetheless, they also speaks to the changing nature of cultural capital at a time when digital technologies have dramatically increased access to culture of all kinds.

## DISCUSSION

By limiting the scope of this analysis to a specific type of television show that is produced in specific economic contexts, these findings indicate that the significance of television's 'third golden age' varies among crime drama viewers. Specifically, this research demonstrates that the discourses of cultural legitimation identified among cultural elites have been taken up by some audiences. If watching television was once outside the realm of middle-class appropriate behaviour because of its association with a lack of intelligence and intellectual curiosity, then, the social processes that elevated television's cultural status have mitigated the significance of such associations for some portions of the post-network landscape. Yet, the same discourses that make some cable crime drama acceptable are used to construct symbolic boundaries that devalue a variety of content and marginalize more traditional viewers.

1. The significance of these findings, however, are limited by multiple factors.  
2. Recruiting basic cable viewers was a larger challenge than anticipated. As a  
3. result, it remains unclear if the gender imbalance among basic cable viewers  
4. was a result of the choice of shows or other factors. An additional concern  
5. is related to a form of social desirability bias. Given the status hierarchies  
6. involved in this research, premium cable viewers and cable omnivores might  
7. very well like and appreciate network crime drama more than they are willing  
8. to admit in an interview. Similarly, they might feel the need to express their  
9. appreciation for premium cable crime dramas in the strongest terms. Thus,  
10. there is the possibility that what such viewers say about cable crime drama  
11. may have more to do with the way in which they wish to be perceived than  
12. in what they really like to watch. Put another way, the shared elements of  
13. premium cable viewers' and cable omnivores' reception practices may reflect  
14. the strength of post-network discourses of legitimation and its hierarchies  
15. more so than actual viewing processes and pleasures.

16. It is also necessary to note that many of the issues associated with the  
17. emergence of television as a form of new media remain on the periphery in  
18. this analysis. Only one respondent reported that the ability or inability to  
19. access television content had an impact on their viewing choices. Mobile  
20. viewing was not significant for the respondents in this sample. The ability  
21. to watch 'anytime, anywhere' was largely taken-for-granted. No respond-  
22. ents reported watching television content on their cellular phones. Tablets,  
23. laptop and desktop computers were discussed interchangeably. Engaging  
24. with streaming services on a computer or through a television with an addi-  
25. tional device like Google's Chromecast or Amazon's Fire TV Stick did not  
26. seem to be a meaningful distinction. Collectively, respondents' undiffer-  
27. entiated engagement with the various manifestations of television as new  
28. media seem to point to the old industry saying that 'content is king'. As  
29. a point of continuity with network era television, viewer choice regarding  
30. cable crime drama seems driven by their desire to engage with particular  
31. shows, personalities, etc., rather than driven by a desire to engage with tele-  
32. vision through a particular platform or in a particular cultural or physical  
33. space.

## 34. CONCLUSION

35. Focusing on viewers' relationships with specific cable crime dramas produced  
36. in a variety of economic contexts, this analysis identifies some of the ways in  
37. which audience reception varies within an increasingly complex cultural land-  
38. scape. In the years leading up to this study, viewer choice rapidly expanded  
39. largely as a consequence of changes within the cable television industry.  
40. Between 2008 and 2013, the number of available cable channels rose by more  
41. than 45 per cent (Spangler 2014) and the number of scripted original cable  
42. series rose from 63 to 162 (Adalain 2015). Despite these changes, the above  
43. findings do not imply that new modes of audience engagement have simply  
44. replaced those that came before. Rather, as the 'television of "sharedness"  
45. (Katz 2009: 7) continues to be replaced by niche content delivered by a variety  
46. of digital means, post-network audience reception practices exist alongside  
47. more traditional ones. From this perspective, audience research address-  
48. ing the relationship between viewers and the cultural status of television  
49. content as it varies within a given genre speaks to issues not easily addressed  
50. by fan studies scholarship that examines communities of consumption as

they are related to a smaller number of texts. This analysis also highlights opportunities for future scholarship to draw parallels between contemporary television and the social processes that legitimated earlier forms of American popular culture. Just as knowledge about film, a cultural form 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), it seems that greater access to discourses of cultural legitimacy allow some viewers the opportunity to approach some cable crime drama as a legitimate culture. Similarly, during the 1920s, the emergence of a 'legitimate' American theatre was only possible in opposition to low-status cultural forms the like vaudeville and cinema (Savran 2009). In this light, audience reception practices during the medium's cultural legitimation expose the broader social processes through which objects and knowledge become cultural capital when individuals employ specific practices and discursive resources.

Although television's cultural status will continue to be negotiated and renegotiated as the cases of American film and theatre demonstrate, all 'golden' ages eventually come to an end. This research was conducted during 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 dramas. At present, it seems that window might be closing. Since 2013, viewer choice has continued to expand as original series produced by streaming video services like Netflix and Amazon enter an already saturated market (Littleton 2015). Moving forward, new opportunities to address cultural consumption as it relates to status hierarchies through audience reception of American television will emerge. But the nature of these opportunities remains unclear. Nonetheless, by moving away from notions of the audience defined by fan productivity, this work opens a new direction for empirical study within television's increasingly fragmented landscape.

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