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"Network" Theory in the Post-Network Era: Using the Cultural Forum Model to Analyze Fictional 9/11 Discourses

The publication of a collection of essays, mostly recent work, by British media scholar James Curran presents a map of the critical media studies field, a charting and organizing of the intellectual development and debates from a figure participating in many of the discussions. Curran dichotomizes the field into liberal and radical approaches, suggesting these approaches once existed independently and then merged in some ways, as each entered phases dominated by what he terms “functionalism” in the struggle to theorize the operation of power within media institutions and their products. The nuanced distinctions he poses among liberal reflection, liberal functionalism, radical criticism, radical functionalism, and radical revisionism are often difficult to distinguish, but the essay primarily proposes a theoretical framework for analyzing cultural industries and their products. Curran advocates an approach that transcends the extremist positions of economic determinist models that perceive power as operating in a uniform, top down manner, and what Eileen Meehan categorizes as approaches that “celebrate the genius of the system and the dominance of resistant readings,” approaches that see power and agency everywhere, in such a way that it becomes unnecessary to theorize their operation.

The construction of this and similarly oppositional dichotomies is not new to media scholarship, and could even be described as characteristic of a great deal critical media work. The poles on either end of the dichotomy largely exist as rhetorical straw men, against which pundits pose arguments for positioning scholarship somewhere in between. Indeed, scholarship attempting to claim a singular grand theory explaining the operation of power within and by cultural industries has been so often repeated and remains so contested because of the
fundamental relevance of this question to critical media studies as an intellectual endeavor. The terrain that is demarcated in these fights relates to foundational principles of how media operate in society, whether one considers this in terms of the formation of a “meaningful discourse” (as suggested by Hall in the British cultural studies approach), “media effects” (as has been the term in the tradition of quantitative mass communication research), or some other referent. Such scholarship is so voluminous and often incendiary in tone because of the significance of what is at stake. Regardless of method or focus, at the core of most all media scholarship (I really want to say all, but I know better, despite being unable to think of an exception) is some argument-postulation-theory that addresses the significance of media in understanding culture; it is the justification for examining media, the answer to who cares and why, each scholar’s raison d’être. I suspect even tenuous unanimity on these questions will never exist, and that passionate intellectual justifications for one position versus another on the continuum between phantom extremes will continue as long as there are media and societies.

I start this discussion with Curran’s recent work because we reexamine the contribution and continued significance of similar ideas—although I, at a more focused level, consider a single model, while he provides a comprehensive historical overview of the field. While we ultimately start and end in very different places, and clearly pursue our work with different intentions, our interconnections speak to the ongoing negotiation among the different foundational models through which scholars explore media, and to the need to revisit these models as theoretical developments, changes in patterns of media flow, and the processes of various media industries alter and adjust various contextual features.

One of many models Curran considers is Newcomb and Hirsch’s Cultural Forum model, which he dismisses as a continuation of liberal functionalism based on what he reads as a celebration of textual ambiguity. The model also can be read as an acknowledgement of textual ambiguity; leaving the article’s significance to derive from its construction of a framework for understanding the relationships among various pieces of television content. The supposition of television as a medium that creates a cultural forum undergirds much existing critical television
scholarship. This foundational model, initially proposed in 1983, focused aspects of the approach to studying culture that had been emerging in British cultural studies on American television.³ Newcomb and Hirsch sought to reconcile divergent approaches and emphases resulting from the bifurcated intellectual history of much U.S. media scholarship, blending the approach of communication scholars who studied television as a communication medium with film and literary scholarship that considered it as an aesthetic object. The value of uniting the approaches results from the fact that neither focus addresses the relevance of both areas in evaluating the role of television as a primary storyteller in American culture, or at least as “central to this process of public thinking” (505). Few communication theories had attended to developing tools for understanding the cultural components of television texts, while film and literature’s emphases on aesthetic features minimized the significance of institutional structures for this medium in which commercial and artistic components are more inextricable than other media forms. British cultural studies’ theories about the operation of culture now guide the study of various other media forms as a theoretical base that recognizes the significance of cultural forms traditionally denigrated or not taken seriously in academic study and their role in the constitution of social power.

The cultural forum model is not explicitly cited in most critical television studies work, but it clearly influences much of the critical television scholarship produced in the United States.⁴ It is often considered in opposition to (or perhaps in conversation with) Todd Gitlin’s model positing the “Hegemonic Process” of television, an opposition/conversation facilitated by their close proximity in the Television: The Critical View reader since its fourth edition, published in 1987.⁵ Both Newcomb and Hirsch and Gitlin recognize similar aspects of television, but value it differently. Newcomb and Hirsch identify contradictory ideological aspects in a single show and across “viewing strips,” evidence that they use to argue television content as a storytelling space in which various ideas about the world intermingle and potentially negotiate differences. Gitlin acknowledges that there is not uniformity in the ideological perspectives presented in television content (what he terms leaks), but instead uses repeated and
common narrative conventions as evidence of the sustainability of hegemonic norms, explaining away contradiction or the presence of non-dominant perspectives by illustrating how they are still “domesticated” into hegemony.

The forum model, like much foundational television and media scholarship, was developed at a specific moment in history during which a particular set of institutional operations governed global norms for the international media industry, and in the case of the cultural forum, the U.S. television industry specifically. These norms of institutional relations and practices have changed in both subtle and radical ways since the creation of much foundational media scholarship, and these foundations now require reassessment to account for institutional and cultural changes. In the case of U.S. television, the emergence of new broadcast competitors and the overwhelming penetration of cable and satellite delivery systems are but two of many changes that have altered the U.S. television industry from the environment that Newcomb and Hirsch assessed. The proliferation of programming providers, however, is an exceptionally salient adjustment when considering the continued viability of the cultural forum model. As a technology, television continues to occupy a central place in American homes (homes with television have remained relatively constant from 97.9% in 1980 to 97.6% in 2000), and time spent viewing has even increased slightly from a daily average of six hours, thirty-six minutes in 1980 to seven hours, twenty-four minutes in 2000.6

The adjustments that require a reconsideration of theoretical foundations result from changes in the range of programming options “television” now encompasses, and the consequence that audiences decreasingly view the same content. Although the “hardware” of television technology has changed slightly, its “applications” have multiplied extensively, changing audiences’ perception of “television” and necessitating address of the most basic question, “what is television?”7 The notion of widely shared texts is a cornerstone of the cultural forum model, and the degree to which a truly mass audience sees fewer and fewer texts requires reconsideration of this and other foundational assumptions supporting the critical study of television.
In this essay I revisit the cultural forum model 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, understandable as a fairly monolithic entity, and at that time, more universalizing models, be it the cultural forum or hegemonic process, offered exceptional explanatory value. As “television” is redefined by various industrial and cultural factors, it become necessary for television scholars to pay closer attention to the model they use relative to the phenomenon they seek to study. Grounding television scholarship in a way that addresses how the post-network era adjusts the object of study requires that we explore how the changed institutional environment has altered many of the assertions rightly assumed by the cultural forum model, but that 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 programs or episodes. In the months following the events of September 11th in New York City and Washington D.C., at least fourteen hours of fictional dramatic narrative, spread across twelve series and seven networks, dealt with themes such as racial profiling and stereotyping, privacy erosion, suspension of due process rights, possibilities for activism, and the general changed reality resulting from the fear engendered by the attacks. The cultural forum is precisely 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 as the creator of a cultural forum in its broadest sense also requires the consideration of non-narrative texts such as news and documentaries, but my focus on the less critically attended to form of narrative storytelling alone 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.
THE CULTURAL FORUM MODEL

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 it is possible for a mass mediated form to present 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.

In some ways, Newcomb’s 1984 article “On the Dialogic Aspects of Mass Communication” might be read as a coda, adding an explanation of the operation of power missing from the cultural forum model. Here, he roots his textual analysis in theories of hegemony emerging at that time from British cultural studies, using a version of hegemony more flexible than that utilized by scholars such as Gitlin. Newcomb instead follows a framework proposed by Hall that acknowledges a range of possible responses (perhaps Gitlin’s leaks), which are limited, but not determined by structures of hegemonic thought.

Applications might better illustrate how the cultural forum model has been used as a framework for television scholarship. The model proves useful in Herman Gray’s examination of how the series In Living Color constructed blackness relative to the larger social and institutional context of the 1980s. Here the forum model explains a process of “negotiation” of symbols of blackness that Gray identifies as varied and even contradictory, and argues as indicative of a struggle over meanings. Similarly, Julie D’Acci’s study of Cagney & Lacey and the negotiations and struggles between the series’ creative team and the network suggests the cultural forum, although she does not cite it. D’Acci’s analysis of the aspects of Cagney and Lacey that defied convention and contradicted patriarchal norms (despite the containment of
more radical ideas and content) bears far greater similarity to a cultural forum foundation than that of a hegemonic process. In another case, Bonnie J. Dow extensively draws from the cultural forum model in positioning her study of the incorporation and containment of feminist ideas in five series airing since the peak of second-wave feminism. Dow uses the cultural forum foundation to explain the presence of aspects seeming indicative of feminist perspectives in series such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, One Day at a Time*, and *Designing Women*, but also draws from Gitlin in explaining how the rhetoric of these texts as well as of *Murphy Brown* and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* ultimately contain women and feminist gains at an ideological level despite their progressive surfaces.

These examples provide a limited indication of how the cultural forum model has been applied in television scholarship, which is helpful in assessing the influence of the model but does little to explain its specific features. The first of three assertions maintained by the cultural forum model is subtly suggested in the article’s title through assumptions one might make of the scope of a medium required 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. In the network era of the article’s composition, three national networks defined U.S. “television.” When audiences or scholars referred to television, they meant ABC, CBS, and NBC, and 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.” 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 of television content made early arguments for its significance highly compelling because of its status as arguably the most “mass” medium.

Second, the cultural forum model suggests 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. This varies from the theoretical approach taken by many political economists and others whose work is theoretically based in a classic Marxist foundation that mandates that the economic structure necessitates a rigid process of ideological transmission, and that commercial media cannot help but “relay and reproduce” dominant ideology. 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.” Related, the authors also assert that television “does not present firm ideological conclusions—despite its formal conclusions—so much as it comments on ideological problems.” 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. Here Curran is right to be critical of the model’s lack of an acknowledgment that certain perspectives and voices are privileged in their access and frequency, but I believe he misreads the model when he asserts that Newcomb and Hirsch suggest the model in celebration of textual diversity as an end in and of itself. When considered in concert with the final assertion, the model provides a rich basis for understanding the role and operation of television as a mass medium.

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, and as such, its requirement that television 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.” This broad understanding of television as an entity more encompassing than a single viewing experience that cannot be adequately minimized to a series or set of episodes, is particularly valuable to the questions academic critics consider and their evaluations of scholarship. This assertion suggests the need to deliberate upon the notion of television units, which I argue becomes particularly crucial in the post-network era.
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.

**U.S. TELEVISION’S CHANGED INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

The cultural forum model assumes the operations of the network era of U.S. television, a time during which only three networks competed for the attention of viewers. From the wide-scale availability of television in the early 1950s through the late 1970s, ABC, CBS, and NBC provided viewers only choice. In this three-way race, a series had to draw at least thirty-three percent of those watching television to remain on the air, and successful series could attract as much as forty percent of the audience.

Although the level of television viewership among the population has remained relatively constant and even increased, viewers now choose among many more options. The gradual distribution of cable first altered the range of options for many viewers. In 1980 only 19.9 percent of households subscribed to cable, a number that quickly grew to fifty percent by 1988. By 2002, more than 89.6 percent of households received channels either by cable or a Direct Broadcast Satellite Service, with most operators of both services providing sixty or more channels.

For those who receive programming via cable or satellite, as well as those still receiving signals over the air, additional broadcast competitors changed the terrain and offered further options. FOX first began broadcasting in 1986, and The WB and UPN emerged a decade later. The result of all of these new programming outlets has been a gradual erosion of the mass audience. Where ninety percent of those watching television watched broadcast networks at the beginning of the 1980s, by the decade’s end the figure amounted to only sixty-four percent. Network share continued to decline during the 1990s, although not at such a sharp rate, with the combined network (ABC, CBS, and NBC) audience share figure at forty-one at the conclusion of the 1999-2000 season. The new broadcast networks further exacerbated audience loss for the
traditional Big Three with FOX averaging a share of nine, and UPN and The WB each drawing four by the end of the 1999-2000 season.

Examining changes in the ratings of the thirty most viewed shows provides another way to quantify the change in viewing. In the network era of three dominant U.S. networks, the top thirty programs earned ratings of twenty to thirty, a number that indicates the percentage of households with televisions who were watching that program. By the 1998-1999 season, a point by which the post-network era was established, the highest rated series earned a 17.8 rating (E.R.), while a program could rank in the top thirty with a rating of nine.

It is not that some other giant emerged to supplant the dominant place of the once invulnerable Big Three networks, but rather the steady assault of a plurality of Lilliputians. Drawing two percent of viewers remains a noteworthy accomplishment for many cable networks, but that two percent multiplied by ten networks, and the one percent drawn by another ten or so now adds up to a significant absence of broadcast viewers. Fortuitously for the Big Three, advertisers still seek to use their television dollars to reach the widest possible audience, which has prevented the traditional broadcast networks from seeing their advertising rates substantially compromised by the competition. With broadcast erosion continuing, however, it is likely only a matter of time before advertisers flee in greater numbers to the substantially lower CPMs 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 foundational 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 all suggest that assumptions of the scope of particular television programs are now very much in question. The post-network era directly alters the conditions upon which the first assertion is based, but the degree to which this first assertion serves as a linchpin calls the others into question. The utility of the cultural forum model is not lost; however, the post-network transition does require attention to how it is applied and increased emphasis on its other assertions.
RECONSIDERING POST-NETWORK U.S. TELEVISION AS A CULTURAL FORUM

The most basic question that begins this inquiry then is whether U.S. 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. But the alterations of the post-network era challenge previous understandings of “television” so that a shared definition, or sense of its epistemology 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.

Many factors resulting from the adjustments of the post-network era may avail themselves as more obvious locations for inquiry than the need to reconsider a foundation model such as the cultural forum. Among the most pressing questions at this time, might include: What is the status of U.S. broadcasting’s foundational mandate of serving the public interest, convenience and necessity since the emergence of subscription service HBO as the preeminent site of the “best” U.S. television programming? In terms of recent technological developments, how do digital personal video recorders such as TiVo and Replay TV fundamentally alter the television experience by decreasing live television viewing? Or, how will the dawdling, but imminent transition from analog to digital alter understandings of television and common viewing practices? New institutional practices have also emerged in recent years, requiring consideration of questions such as whether the use of original-run repurposing—second and third airings of original series during the week of their debut—combats audience fragmentation by providing additional venues for viewing, and what is its affect on viewer’s perception of network identity, or distinctions between broadcast and cable content?

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, and the adjustments may make topics and lines of inquiry once valuable decreasingly relevant, or increasingly irrelevant as the case may be stated. 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, scholars must be careful to address these variations and not assume all television content equivalently significant, particularly when inquiries center 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*, *All in the Family*, or *The Cosby Show*. Of course post-network series continue to enact the cultural forum process for the audience members viewing them, but the audience of a show such as *Queer as Folk* 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. An “If a tree falls” question emerges in the post-network era of niche audiences that was less of a concern for the broad and varied audiences of series such as *All in the Family*. With so many other options available, do ideologically polarized audiences view the same series, particularly those known for transcending dominant norms. It seems reasonable to assume the answer to this question is no, particularly when so many programming options now exist.

So then, 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 revolutionary potential diminished? What can *Queer as Folk* accomplish if the audience’s knowledge of the series leads homophobes to ignore it, arguably preventing it from enacting the consciousness-raising some have suggested a series such as *All in the Family* achieved. In
another case, we must be cautious of our valuations of the significance of the increase in situation comedies featuring historically under-represented African American casts during the 1990s, as comedy audiences became segregated alongside the bifurcation of sitcom casts. The increase in comedies starring Black actors has not resulted in a corresponding increase in these images and stories being seen by White audiences. Network era standards of relevance and significance disserve us in a changed industrial context if our 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” (60). The industry has adjusted its strategies in response to the multiplicity of program providers so that competitors now seek both the broad blockbuster hit and the niche success with clearly defined edge. Television networks have responded with the previously noted strategy of original-run repurposing, by measuring audiences based on the multiple airings of the show, rather than singular airings, and by closely watching for audience overlap and ways to expand crossover audiences. Many practices and standards of the network era continue to operate, however, others have been adjusted, and others eliminated and replaced to respond to the dynamic nature of the period.

As a medium, television likely retains its status as the primary storyteller in American society (at least as of 2003), 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 programs requires that critics revise the scope of their analyses in an effort to respond to the adjusted status of the forum. This likely makes individual series and networks less significant, and requires that we 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 the cross-program analysis supported by the “viewing strip” certainly suggests a breadth of analysis—but in its application more has been made of its scope and space.
for negotiation aspects. 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.

In the final section of this paper 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 television is defined broadly, rather than narrowly confined to an individual series, episode, or similar unit. Understanding that we can only speak of an aspect of television, and 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 program.

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 Center 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 does indeed suggest. When examining a topic or theme in the post-network era we must cast our nets much more broadly and consider a wide breadth of content, allowing 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 the case at hand, dramatic television series in the 2001-2002 season, and we must seriously deliberate about asserting that our findings can be considered representative of anything larger.

During the eight months from October, 2001 through May of 2002 television audiences could find sophisticated stories linked implicitly and sometimes explicitly to the disastrous events of September 11, 2001 and the pain, fear, and anxiety that the events created. These stories were mostly standalone 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 episodes, but appeared unannounced within the regular flow of prime-time television. As a television scholar I did not search out these episodes, at least initially, but as the preponderance of them happened into my regular viewing, I eventually checked episode guides of series I thought likely to have accommodated the dominant themes and did intentionally seek out the last few shows that had not been part of my regular viewing routine.

I mention this because it served as such an 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. As I will explore below, the episodes are exceptionally varied in their narrative strategies and 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 non-fictional television content.
Negotiations in Police Procedural Narratives

The episode of *The District* titled “Twist of Hate” (CBS, 1/26/02, Episode 212) is arguably the most comprehensive of 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. The narrative initially foreshadows a likely retaliation by a young, Muslim, Arab American man who is the boyfriend of the daughter of the mosque’s religious leader, Omar Khalid. Scenes depict the young man as hot headed and likely to seek vengeance. When a rabbi is robbed and murdered the next evening the police initially suspect the boy and interrogate him, but he has a valid alibi. The next night the police find David Watson, a Black man, nearly beaten to death, who recalls the attacker had a swastika tattoo. The police investigation reveals that the attacks on Watson and rabbi are 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. Apparently proud of his actions, the skinhead admits to the crime without requiring much interrogation, acknowledging a motive of hoping to incite a war among all of those the White power groups seek to destroy.

Before the episode’s conclusion, Khalid’s daughter is hospitalized after being hit in the head by a pipe during violence growing from the post-mosque attack frenzy. Chief Mannion (Craig T. Nelson) confronts Khalid with the accusation that he vandalized his own mosque, which Khalid admits to, and explains as motivated by a desire to attract popular sympathy because America “loves its victims,” and to gain more police protection for the mosque.

In addition to this primary story that is also complicated with rapid fire rhetoric among the feuding ethnic groups, a subplot also initially suggests a hate crime against Mannion’s Black assistant, Ella Farmer, which is later revealed as a non-racially motivated prank among boys. Two detectives also hold a running commentary throughout the episode on their assessments of the racial situation as Debreno (a White detective) suggests that Page (a Black detective) exhibits racist behavior toward Arab Americans. The episode reveals the root of this ethnic distrust to be a result of an event Page witnessed while serving in Operation Desert Storm; a woman was killed by her father to restore honor 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 stop and reconsider their initial assumptions after learning Khalid was responsible for the mosque bombing. While appearing to be a part of the post 9/11 dramatic negotiations, it ultimately proves itself to be a different sort of show than those 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 deliberation of the resulting environment of fear, *The District* episode uses the 9/11 motif more as a plot catalyst, with a much less clear, or at least ambivalent sentiment. Never the less, its use of so many relevant signifiers makes it important and clearly marks it as part of the cultural negotiation. In one sense
it argues for the importance of peace among subordinated groups (as opposed to killing each other off to the benefit of White extremists), however, the revelation of Khalid’s complicity at the end of the episode undercuts much of the previous narrative. The abrupt consequent end perhaps allows the true ramification of this new information to pass without much consideration. But at some level, Khalid is to blame for the rabbi’s death, Watson’s beating, and for creating a level of tension that led to his daughter’s assault.

The episode over-determines its connection to the post 9/11 world by including so many signifiers in the central plot line as well as the subplots, including 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. The over-determination with multiple plots and subplots, rapid fire rhetoric, and the complicated prospect of who was to blame makes it is difficult to discern a clear ideological agenda. The revelation of Khalid’s complicity might suggest the episode sought to offer an anti-Arab American sentiment along the lines of “they are bringing this on themselves.” Assessing the entire episode, including initial sympathy with the Arab American characters, makes such a reading tenuous. Ultimately, I suspect most viewers were left with a sense of confusion because 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, 12/4/01, Episode 906). The primary story chronicles the search for a baby stolen from a hospital nursery, but Detectives Medavoy and Jones are called to the scene of an arson at a television store owned by two Arab American brothers. The daughter of one of the men was injured by a falling shelf and taken to the hospital. The brothers initially suggest a neighborhood man named Chris Padgett as a suspect because he had repeatedly hassled them with ethnic slurs, but after interrogating Padgett, the detectives find him to have a valid alibi. Medavoy and Jones return to the hospital to report the news and seek more leads, but the certainty with which one of the brothers believes Padgett to be the culprit
leads him to suggest the police are not really trying to find the arsonist due to their racist bias against Arab Americans. Medavoy and the brother argue, and the detectives return to the station, where a neighbor of the television store comes in and points them to the real arsonist, Mike Bigelow. The neighbor explains that she was motivated to come in because the racist act was wrong, as the brothers had been in the neighborhood for ten years and she felt they had as much right as anyone to be there.

Medavoy and Jones bring in Bigelow for interrogation and use the same techniques as they had with Padgett, sympathizing with him, suggesting they too believe that “those people don’t belong here anymore.” Claiming to be on his side, Medavoy and Jones encourage him to write an account that won’t implicate him in a hate crime. He falls into their trap, as the detectives later return his fictionalized confession claiming to have evidence that he’d been harassing the owners, making it apparent that it was a hate crime. The suspect then must recount the truth, and Assistant District Attorney Haywood tells the detectives he will be up for twenty-five years-to-life with the hate crime charge.

Before the episode closes, the son of one of the brothers visits the squad room to apologize for his uncle’s outburst and accusations at the hospital. Medavoy returns the apology and the boy then asks the precinct room in general, “What can we do, ’cause my family has lived here for 30 years. I was born here. We’re Americans.” 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.”

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. 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.”
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 right erosion that emerges from *The District*'s initial suspicion of the Arab American in the rabbi’s beating, the plotline emphasizes personal struggles and stories. The Arab American families are highly sympathetic in the apparent double bind of being considered American one day and the target of suspicion and hatred the next. Sipowicz’s advice of “hang in there” may seem empty, but is the most truthful suggestion that could be offered given the context of history. The decision to include the discussion between Jones and Haywood was also significant, as it is entirely unnecessary for the narrative, but provides a very personalized reaction to the character’s internal struggle with the overnight birth of an ethnicity-based stereotype. Haywood’s response separating what is thought and what is done as different components of racism is also thought provoking 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 of stories that produce institutional solutions as more progressive than stories offering solutions at the individual level. The contribution of the *NYPD Blue* episode and many of the other narratives comes from their ability to make human 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 right erosion indicates how policy dictums coded in political rhetoric and delivered by government officials affect people. Updates about new governmental policies may seem “natural” and “common sense” when delivered as decontextualized news items, but posing narratives depicting victims with which the stories encourage audience identification enables a different kind of understanding.
Other series with police procedural components also incorporated 9/11 themes. *Third Watch* constructed companion episodes, the first set on September 10th, concluding with the beginning of the Twin Tower disaster (“September 11th,” NBC, 11/22/01, Episode 302). 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 Time,” NBC, 11/29/01, Episode 303). This normally action-driven show focuses on more personal stories, with plot time spent following officers through their interactions with each other and family, and an emphasis on their conversations about their fears and reevaluations of their careers.

*Law & Order* has also incorporated post 9/11 themes into various episodes, although the series tends to focus on these issues more in the courtroom drama component of the series 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, 5/22/02, Episode 1224), 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 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 to Green being pulled over while driving. The detectives continue the conversation about the “dirty little secret” (racial profiling) of police work with their Lieutenant. Racial profiling themed stories had appeared frequently in police procedural narratives prior to 9/11, and the new context of Arab Americans as the primary victims of this practice allowed some play with bias assumptions and stereotypes that had been previously articulated.

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. An article focused on textual analysis of one of these motifs or the discourse produced in a certain type of series would 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.

**CONCLUSION**

The fraction of 9/11 themed shows considered here begins to indicate the various ways this event and its cultural consequences are transmitted, negotiated, and shared. Again, I emphasize that this example only includes one set of narratives, and a longer project incorporating legal, family, and educational narratives would indicate a far broader range of stories. The police procedural example is illustrative not only for the 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 and a process of reconsideration. 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 must come into conversation with the first, and so on.\(^{34}\)

It is not likely that audiences see all of the variations multiple series’ treatments provide. With viewing distributed across a broad range of options, it is difficult to speculate about how many or even which types of shows a singular audience member is likely to encounter, and in what order. My viewing of narrative fiction is also likely much broader than most audience members, since I watch shows I do not enjoy because my vocation necessitates attention to a
variety of content. In my case, I saw *The District* episode as a rerun, which aired the day before *The Division* episode. The two narratives (which are initially very similar) consequently merged, or were in conversation with each other to a degree unlikely had I seen *The District* episode during its original airing seven months earlier. As the post-network era trends programming toward multiple plays through practices such as original-run repurposing, and technologies such as TiVo decrease live viewing, it is difficult if not impossible to know when and in what order audiences face certain episodes, even those of the most popular shows. Certainly much valuable audience research might investigate these questions, and empirically study whether and how audiences negotiate the ideas in multiple series’ material. For the discussion here I am suggesting the need for more complicated understandings of how material circulates when constructing textual analyses.

Certainly 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, particularly *E.R.*, *Strong Medicine*, and *Providence*, had episodes with a narrative exploring Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome. A similar cross-text analysis might be done for episodes on racial profiling in police procedural narratives, or other “ripped from the headlines” stories that disparate programs might incorporate. While 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 investigations.

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

Most scholarship incorporating 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. The context of the post-network era requires de-emphasizing television’s scope, but instead emphasizing the multiplicity of series and content it makes available. Consequently, scholars must pay more attention to the dissemination of content as a process and carefully consider the units of analysis we choose. In some ways, the multiplicity of television content makes the cultural forum model a more relevant framework, as the multiplicity of channels (at least thirty in most homes) expands the “forum” in significant ways. Admittedly, the technology should not be viewed as deterministic, but we can look to research on audiences to confirm that audiences do engage a broader range of channels than the network era three, and analyze schedules for evidence of a greater variety of forms and content despite the centralized ownership and various repurposing strategies.

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 in a given night even in the network era). Related, the changes of the post-network era can be seen altering the position of television in what Bernard Miege theorized as three logics underlying the production of culture and information. In the late 1980s context of his writing, Miege could argue that television fit into a “Flow Model,” which is characterized by its continuity, range of diffusion, and ephemerality. Contemporary U.S. television bears increasing components of an alternative model, what Miege calls a “Publishing Model,” which is characterized by great uncertainty in product success, which leads to a large catalog to spread out risk, and the segmentation of
audiences; production factors that alter viewers’ relationship with the content. At this point U.S. television is best characterized as a blending of the flow and publishing models, another example illustrating how models must be refined and reconceptualized as the object of study evolves.

As our objects of study change, we must also return to the basic foundations that may be implicit in our work, and how we theorize the relationship of ideological analysis to audience reception and effect.

4 Work citing Newcomb and Hirsch’s model: (organized by aspect of model emphasized)

Scope

Space for Negotiation


**Ritual/Viewing Strip**


C. Williams, “After the Classic, the Classical and Ideology, the Differences of Realism,” *Screen* 35, no. 3 (1994): 275-292.


As I researched this essay and came to realize how little work cites the cultural forum model despite bearing a clear intellectual debt, I began surveying colleagues who teach at or graduated from top U.S. media studies programs. (Programs surveyed include: The University of Texas at Austin; University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of California at San Diego, Indiana University). All agreed on the canonical nature of the essay and either taught it or encountered it as a foundational model for understanding the relationship of television within culture.


14 Gitlin, 518.

15 Newcomb and Hirsch, 506.

16 Newcomb and Hirsch, 508. Emphases original.
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), 232.

http://www.ncta.com/industry_overview/indStat.cfm?indOverviewID=2 (4 Dec. 2002). (73.5 million cable subscribers + 21 million DBS subscribers = 94.5 million, out of a television universe of 105.4 million.)


This number increases to fifty-eight if FOX, UPN, and The WB are included.

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 Nov. 2002, 18-20, 18. Also see John M. Higgins and Allison Romano, “Cheaper by the Thousand,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, 4 Feb. 2002, 20-28


Curiously, *The Division* episode “Before the Deluge” (Lifetime 8/7/2002, Episode 221) begins similarly. The officers respond to the shooting of an Arab American shop owner, which is immediately followed by the murder of female rabbi in a temple in the same neighborhood. *The Division* episode then shifts into a hate crime narrative with a member of multiple White supremacy 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.

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

It may be relevant for non-viewers to know that Haywood and Jones are African American.

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


Newcomb, “One Night.”