

The Neoliberalization of Identity Politics in American Television Production

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Abstract

This article provides a political economy analysis of the television industry in relation to the ‘neoliberalization of identity politics’—the process by which progressive movements around identity politics become co-opted by neoliberal logics, depoliticized, and reoriented towards serving the needs of cultural elites. The television industry has been shaped by neoliberal business practices that appear at odds with progressive concepts such as diversity that are built into the emergence of complex, artistic, ‘prestige’ television. I argue that instead, television elites accommodate progressivism within neoliberalism as a strategy for profit accumulation. To do so they advance practices emblematic of ‘plastic representation.’

My argument is presented in five parts. First, I show how neoliberal logics have impacted upon the television industry. Second, I trace the emergence of prestige television and consider its limited ability to meaningfully disrupt the traditional television business. Third, I define and explicate the neoliberalization of identity politics through examples of on-screen representation. Fourth, I consider how television audiences are governed and constructed to serve neoliberal goals. Fifth, from case studies of the streaming service Max and television show *The Idol*, I illustrate how the neoliberalization of identity politics undermines the potentials of prestige television by prioritizing profit at the expense of television creators and consumers.

Streaming service Max generated controversy in 2022 for shelving the already-completed film *Batgirl*. Throughout 2023, headlines announced the removal of library titles and the cancellation of finished projects across streaming services as cost cutting measures prevailed. This was a disorienting change for consumers who had come to consider streaming services as destinations of content permanence (Salazar and Vilas-Boas, 2022; Whitten and Rizzo, 2023). In May, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) went on strike to protest unfair economic conditions and were joined in July by the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA). This created a historic work stoppage that severely affected the production of television content (Wilkinson, 2023). As the year came to a close, journalist think pieces declaring the end of television’s golden age began to surface (Schulman, 2023). Some referred to the current

age of television as “trough TV,” whereby television producers aim for the lowest-quality content possible that can still return a profit (Adams, 2023). Amidst this turmoil, 2023 was the first year since 2012—excepting 2020, when COVID-19 impeded entertainment production—to see a decline in the production of original, scripted television content. Analysts attributed this trend to the aforementioned strikes and to the decision of streaming services to place fewer season orders than in years past (Carr, 2024).

Since the start of the 21st century, but especially since 2014, television has been considered to be operating at its cultural peak. The term ‘prestige television’ has come to encapsulate the qualities of television programming. It has become a marker of high cultural status, substantial production budgets, complex storytelling, morally ambiguous characters who transform over episodes, and association with ‘auteur’ storytellers (Coon, 2023; Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Mittell, 2015; Perkins, 2015). In line with decade-long gains in diverse representation both in front of and behind the television screen (Ramón and Hunt, 2022), prestige television has increasingly embraced more diverse character ensembles, associating prestige with high cultural status as well as with social progress (Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Hassler-Forest, 2018; Martin, 2023). Prestige television may be contributing to social progress by embracing a particular value set, but an increasingly crowded prestige television market places the goals of serving the public good and generating profit into conflict. The choice by television producers to prioritize profit informs much of the unrest the industry experienced throughout 2023.

The television industry can be examined in the context of what I term the neoliberalization of identity politics—the process by which progressive movements around identity politics become depoliticized and reoriented towards serving the needs of cultural elites. On television, this process is captured by Warner’s (2017) concept of ‘plastic representation,’ whereby diverse representation is engaged with superficially to serve the goals of profit accumulation. Here, I take a political economy approach by “tracing political and economic entities, forces, and structures that foster the production, distribution, and continuation of some kinds of expression” on television (Meehan, 2020: 345). To develop my argument, I first offer a definition of neoliberalism and identify how its precepts drove restructuring of the US television marketplace. Next, I trace the business of prestige television and its limited ability to meaningfully disrupt the traditional television industry. Then, I theoretically develop the term ‘neoliberalization of identity politics’ and provide examples of how this process emerges through on-screen representation. I go on to show how the television audience is constructed to serve neoliberal goals, contrasting the view that audiences are liberated by diverse streaming content. Finally, I examine the streaming service Max to show how the neoliberalization of identity politics has undermined the potentials of prestige television by prioritizing profit at the expense of those who participate in the television industry and those who consume television content.

The neoliberal economics of television

In his seminal text *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as an ideology which considers social goals as best achieved through economic means:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (2)

Neoliberal ideology thus serves as a guide to all human action, with the most ethical behavior being that which maximizes contributions to the marketplace, rather than that which seeks to redress persistent social inequality. This latter reality undermines the neoliberal promise of equal opportunity (Bloom, 2017; Callison and Manfredi, 2020; Harvey, 2005; Ventura, 2012).

Under Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in the 1990s, neoliberal economic policies of privatization and deregulation allowed wealthy businesses and corporations to assert themselves as central to society because of their economic contributions. How such policies might reinforce wealth inequality and bolster the power of economic elites was ignored (Harvey, 2005; Ventura, 2012). In a society in which neoliberal ideology circulates, the individual's most important role is to accumulate capital, justifying the social position of those at the top of society regardless of the means they use to gain that social position (Bloom, 2017; Salzinger, 2020). Ventura (2012) takes note of how this false premise circulates in American culture:

In American neoliberal culture, the state's emphasis is increasingly placed on promoting the financial wellbeing of the wealthiest using the justification that they are the job creators and the engines of the economy; in the popular political rhetoric, code words such as 'innovators,' 'entrepreneurs,' and 'risk takers,' come to replace not only loaded terms such as 'filthy rich' but even comparatively neutral terms such as 'the rich.' (69)

By emphasizing the potential economic benefits the wealthy elite can offer, such rhetoric obscures the unequal conditions from which these supposed benefits are derived.

Neoliberal policies have had major implications for the structure of the television industry. Legislation passed during the Regan administration to limit restrictions on corporate activity, followed by legislation such as the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which scaled back media ownership rules (Harvey, 2020), advanced consolidation among media companies across the television business. Meanwhile, cable television was marketed to audiences as offering an expansion of viewing choices. Recent mergers such as that between Disney and 21st Century Fox, or purchases such as the sale of Time Warner to AT&T and then to Discovery Inc. to form Warner Bros. Discovery, reflect the reality that a few large corporations control the television industry including production and viewer access (Harvey, 2020; Lotz, 2018; Meehan, 2020; Shattuc, 2020). Meehan (2020) argues that in these circumstances the television industry does not serve the public interest but the needs of economic elites. As just one example, she notes how large corporations recycle content across as many media properties as possible in order to maximize profit (instead of taking on the risk of producing new and innovative content). The dubious claim that neoliberal economic policies enhance competition is contradicted by the net result: a small number of corporations have closed off access to the television industry. This in turn limits the potential for innovation, choice, and a variety of perspectives to thrive (Byerly, 2019; Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Lotz, 2018).

Television streaming services, which are often seen as industry disruptors with the potential to eliminate traditional television altogether (Lotz, 2018), largely emulate the neoliberal business practices that have shaped the traditional industries of broadcast and cable. This is because television streaming is often only a small part of a larger company's business goals (Johnson, 2023a), a consequence of the corporate consolidation and wealth accumulation previously described. Petruska's (2023) analysis of Amazon's Prime video service exemplifies this: "TV is not

a hobby for Amazon, nor is it a side hustle. Instead, it is a thoroughly integrated piece of a much larger commercial structure” (235). Amazon’s streaming service situates customers in its corporate ecosystem with the goal of boosting purchases of other products and services they offer (Petruska, 2023). Clearly, this strategy is utilized to serve corporate and commercial interests, rather than those of the consumer. Hunting and Gray (2023) explain how Disney uses its Disney+ service to capitalize on the nostalgia of its legacy content while forging connections between old and new characters and texts, sustaining brand loyalty while appealing to new audiences. Johnson (2023b) likewise notes how Paramount+ has focused on reducing audience churn by leveraging legacy and franchise content to create a long-term flow of programming that keeps audiences indefinitely tied to the service. In the streaming space, having an established brand, a deep library of content, and diverse economic goals enhances the chances of success while pushing out those who cannot compete on the same terms.

The business of prestige television

While the television industry has increasingly been shaped by neoliberal economic policies favourable to corporate elites, content on television has also become increasingly complex, leading to what has been described as ‘prestige television’ (or other related terms that seek to classify content as superior to ‘regular’ television of the past) (Keeler, 2023). The epithet ‘prestige’ captured television’s newfound association with serious art forms as high-quality productions became the new industry standard (Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Keeler, 2023). Such television is characterized by high production costs (Cardwell, 2007; Rawlins, 2023) that reflect the artistic vision of an ‘auteur’ who elevates the program beyond simple commercial interest (Coon, 2023; Wayne, 2018). These programs are expected to tell highly serialized, complex stories (Bottomley, 2023; Cardwell, 2007; Rawlins, 2023) which stray from traditional storytelling conventions to surprise the viewer (Bignell, 2007; Mittell, 2015), such as blending multiple genres into a single program (Coon, 2023; Keeler, 2023). Storytelling trends include featuring anti-hero characters that confront viewers with challenging moral questions, and long-form stories explore the profound transformation of a character’s personality, beliefs, and goals (Perkins, 2015). While the earliest iterations of prestige television defaulted to the white, heterosexual, middle-/upper-class male perspective (Newman and Levine, 2011), it subsequently became increasingly associated with physically diverse casts and social justice issues related to identity politics (Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Hassler-Forest, 2018; Martin, 2023). For example, rape culture was addressed through a feminist lens in the Netflix series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Unbelievable* (Havas and Horeck, 2021).

Bignell (2007) discusses how the trend of complex television took shape on broadcast and cable in the 1980s and 1990s, as serial storytelling and distinct visual styles became more commonplace and sustained viewing was increasingly expected. Shows like *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987) were emblematic of this shift. Lotz (2018) notes that for many television scholars, the premium cable HBO series *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), which premiered in 1999, marked an important shift for the industry due to its embrace of complex narrative and moral themes. HBO’s original slogan—“it’s not TV, it’s HBO”—was coupled with a monthly subscription rate and a slate of high-quality programming. Following the success of *The Sopranos*, shows such as *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001–2005), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008), *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004–2006) fortified the idea that television could be moved up the cultural ladder and away from the least objectionable programming strategy that was traditionally associated with broadcast networks (Newman and

Levine, 2011; Vaage, 2016). As a premium cable, advertisement-free network that requires a paid subscription to gain access, HBO's cultural prominence at this time did represent a disruption of television's standard economics. As Smythe (2001) has observed, the demographically profiled audience was once the principal commodity produced by television and sold to advertisers. By contrast, HBO and other premium cable outlets modelled a closed ecosystem for profit in a way that would later be emulated by subscription-based streaming services.

In order to show advertisers that more niche cable audiences could be of value, ad-supported cable outlets soon followed the lead of HBO and developed flagship shows such as *The Shield* on FX (FX, 2002–2008), *Monk* on USA (USA, 2002–2009), and *Mad Men* on AMC (AMC, 2007–2015) that purposefully embraced the attributes of prestige television (Lotz, 2018). In regard to the prestige series *The Americans* (FX, 2013–2018), Coon (2023) notes how FX used the show to generate cultural capital and establish itself as a brand willing to take creative risks. They adopted the slogan “Fearless” and kept the show on air for six seasons despite lacklustre ratings. The short-term goal of prestige content on cable was not, initially, profit driven; rather, it was about standing out in a crowded television landscape. As Lotz (2018) writes, “Studios needed to make not simply television shows people would watch on Sunday night, but television shows people would watch and talk about ten years later” (148). The streaming services that soon followed were not originally designed to mimic this strategy. They began as repositories for library media content that could provide an extra source of revenue for traditional television outlets (Lotz, 2018). However, Netflix's business model readily aligned with the prestige television business once they entered the original content space, as evident in their first high-budget, star-power-driven, original series *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) (Lotz, 2018). While cable networks relied on individual flagship series to make their brand distinctive and appealing for advertisers, streaming services, led by Netflix, subsequently positioned themselves as portals of seemingly unlimited content where any viewer could find high-quality options to match their personal tastes and interests (Lotz, 2018). Tryon (2015) posits that Netflix's branding aligns their identity with the very notion of prestige: “Netflix's self-promotion places emphasis on its ability to provide original, groundbreaking television that challenged the norms of traditional TV storytelling” (110). By combining a deep library with the promise of prestige content, streaming services have positioned themselves as the future of television by claiming to offer a quality and breadth of storytelling that has never been offered before (Tryon, 2015; Wayne, 2018).

Certainly, the embrace of prestige television by streaming services has led to notable improvements in the television viewing experience, as viewers are now offered a vast array of high-quality content and greater agency over when, how, and what to watch within flexible pricing models and sleek digital environments (Lotz, 2018). But the tendency to romanticize prestige content as ushering in a television golden age fails to account for the social and economic implications. Newman and Levine (2011) are particularly concerned with how the connotations of prestige television may reinforce social taste hierarchies and overlook how such television ultimately serves the interests of corporate elites. Prestige television has achieved cultural legitimation by disparaging television in its original form and associating modern television content with art forms considered more worthwhile. The very design of television streaming contributes to this association by transforming television into something that can be preserved, revisited, and appreciated over time (Newman and Levine, 2011). Although prestige television conventions can be found across the television domain, more traditional outlets continue to struggle for legitimacy, as *their* efforts in producing prestige content tend to be ignored by critics and scholars (Bottomley,

2023; Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Keeler, 2023; Martin, 2023). Newman and Levine (2011) argue that elevating television's cultural status is the project of cultural elites, who are "nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return" (7). Deciding what is culturally 'good' through television effectively reinforces the idea that elite culture is desirable and preferable to that of the lower classes. This serves the neoliberal goal of justifying economic elitism in the first place.

The neoliberal tenet that an unregulated marketplace inevitably fosters competition, which in turn incentivizes television producers to create the best possible television content, ignores the reality of television economics. Broadcast networks may continue to struggle for legitimacy in the prestige television hierarchy, but this struggle is often internalized; for example, Disney owns broadcast network ABC, but it also owns an array of cable channels including FX, has its own streaming service, Disney+, and has bought out Comcast to take full ownership of the streaming service Hulu (Barnes, 2023). Clearly, competition is delimited by market dominance and upward wealth accumulation. Consequently, it follows that those who produce prestige television are most likely to focus on its economic value and how to replicate it, developing a formula for a type of storytelling that, ironically, has been lauded for novelty and innovation. Cardwell (2007) draws an early distinction between 'good' and 'quality' television, positing that having all the relevant aesthetic markers makes something quality, but stylistic integrity is what makes it good. A program has stylistic integrity if its themes and style are intertwined to reflect serious or contemporary social issues. Viewers are thereby rewarded for deep engagement with program content. Recent high-profile yet unsuccessful television series that relied on notions of prestige in their marketing—including diverse casting, high quality cinematography, the involvement of an auteur, and complex, gritty themes (Barth, 2023; Geraets, 2023; Martin, 2023)—were accompanied by a strategy which prioritized potentially profitable elements rather than the integrity of the product as a whole. Likewise, series with wide appeal—reminiscent of the early days of broadcast television—have been marketed to audiences as prestige whether or not they genuinely live up to the qualifier. Any association with the low-class television of the past—found on broadcast television outlets and produced for the broadest audience possible—is thereby mitigated (Kozak and Zeller-Jacques, 2021). Strict dividing lines between old and new television are all the more questionable when one considers how some traditional television business practices, such as free ad-supported viewing, live channels, and streamed shopping services, have resurfaced in digital spaces (Johnson, 2023a; Vlessing, 2023; Whitten and Rizzo, 2023). The assumption that prestige television is inherently good for society and reflects cultural progress is therefore complicated, if not entirely undermined, by the economic practices behind it. Instead, the business of prestige television reflects the goals of a neoliberal society: to engage with the notion of prestige only insofar as it can contribute to wealth accumulation. As the following section will show, this conflation of profit and cultural progress can have profound political consequences.

The neoliberalization of identity politics on television

With the changing economic structure of the television industry and its constraints upon the critical potential of prestige television elucidated, we can now turn to the seemingly progressive concept of diversity. This key marker of prestige television (Hassler-Forest, 2018; Martin, 2023) can be co-opted by wealthy television industry elites in the service of wealth accumulation and subsequently

stripped of its political meaning. This reflects what I refer to as the ‘neoliberalization of identity politics.’

The term ‘identity politics’ was first coined by the Combahee River Collective in 1977 and was originally conceived of as a way for marginalized groups—Black women in particular—to band together and collectively engage with politics (Táíwò, 2022). In its earliest conceptions, the term reflected both economic and cultural equality as well as acknowledging how battles for identity are structurally intertwined with battles against capitalism (Moran, 2014). In considering the recent surge of interest in identity politics outside of economic issues, Wrenn (2014) posits that individuals under neoliberalism have sought to develop personal self-worth and a sense of agency outside of the crippling demands of neoliberalism. The problem here, she argues, is that neoliberal economic policies remain firmly in place as the state positions identity politics socially, rather than economically. Likewise, Fraser (2009) connects identity politics to claims for social justice rooted in the politics of recognition, or the creation of a difference-friendly world that does not require assimilation within a dominant cultural order. Fraser (2009) argues that there is a tendency to assume the goals of recognition and redistribution to be incompatible. In a neoliberal society, the politics of recognition is allowable if it does not require the economics of neoliberalism to change. This results in symbolic, empty gestures that aim to recognize distinctiveness without generating any meaningful change (Fraser, 2009). Even when identity groups have anti-capitalist goals, the extension of neoliberal logics into all aspects of life creates conditions in which it is nearly impossible to mobilize against capitalism as a system (Moran, 2014).

Three related theories address how elite members of society can take control of identity politics, render them apolitical, and redirect them towards economic ends. First, Táíwò (2022) uses the term ‘elite capture’ to describe how social systems with unequal distributions of power facilitate conditions in which political movements can be taken over by the well-positioned and well-resourced to serve the interests of the powerful over the interests of the marginalized. Táíwò (2022) includes the contemporary example of cities commissioning Black Lives Matter murals while critical race theory is being banned in schools, and non-white citizens continue to be targets of police brutality at alarming rates. Here, elites may use identity politics to appear progressive without taking meaningful action to redress the injustices that affect marginalized groups.

Second, Leong’s (2021) term ‘identity capitalism’ similarly recognizes how elites use the identities of others to protect themselves against perceived threats to their control and power, and to generate economic, social, and cultural capital. Those closest to the normative ingroup, who have the attributes of being white, straight, male, able-bodied, and middle-/upper-class, have the best chance of being or becoming economic elites. Such individuals demonstrate that they are not bigoted by using the identity of others to their advantage. In this regard, identity capitalism gives the appearance of progress by associating normative ingroup members with the values of diversity without addressing structural power (Leong, 2021). Examples of identity capitalism include workplaces hiring more women but failing to address a sexist work culture, and the placement of diverse individuals into powerful positions only to use those individuals as evidence that systemic discrimination no longer exists (Leong, 2021).

Third, Seamster and Charron-Chénier (2017) describe ‘predatory inclusion’ as “a process whereby members of a marginalized group are provided with access to a good, service or opportunity from which they have historically been excluded but under conditions that jeopardize the benefits of access” (199-200). Using the example of differences in educational debt accumulation between white and Black college students, they show how wealth inequality is a

product of both historical and contemporary practices, systematically designed to favor privileged groups and further disenfranchise marginalized ones, even when access appears to be equal. Predatory inclusion aligns with Leong's (2021) conception of 'identity entrepreneurs'—members of an outgroup who commodify their identity to get ahead. Leong (2021) highlights a range of examples—from Sarah Palin cynically capitalizing on her classically feminine persona in the 2008 election, to figures such as Beyonce and Colin Kaepernick taking advantage of their status to uplift Black communities. Ultimately though, even at its best, identity entrepreneurship implores outgroup members to perform identity in a specific way that aligns with capitalist interests. This limits the range of expression available to marginalized individuals and encourages infighting that distracts from larger issues. Thus, elites of all backgrounds can embrace identity politics without sacrificing economic privileges, while predatory inclusion and identity entrepreneurship actually create more harmful conditions for marginalized groups.

Warner (2017) adeptly brings these theories into focus in the media context through the concept of 'plastic representation'—the artificial representation of diversity on screen. The tendency to reduce representation to a positive/negative binary, where any appearance of diversity is automatically considered to be progressive, creates a situation in which "the degree of diversity became synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than with the dimensionality of those performances" (33). In focusing on quantity over quality, plastic representation allows for the circulation of a hollow version of diversity that ultimately conforms to the prevailing cultural order (Warner, 2017). One manifestation of this is colorblind casting, in which many diverse faces appear on screen, but the differences between those diverse faces are obscured and erased, and their political backgrounds ignored such that any character becomes interchangeable with another (Petermon, 2018). Even when characters are written specifically to represent a marginalized group, plastic representation continues to play a role. Becker's (2006) analysis of gay representation on television revealed that, even as it grew significantly in the 1990s, such characters mainly existed in straight worlds that ignored civil rights issues and framed rarely represented instances of homophobia as an interpersonal issue, rather than a systemic one. Squires (2014) likewise argued that the growth of nonwhite representation on screen has foregrounded non-white individuals who live discrimination-free lives. Hassler-Forest (2018) argues that such cursory engagement with diversity produces contradictory ideological positions that ultimately amount to very little political impact. Plastic representation thus aligns neatly with the theories described above by increasing the quantity of diversity on screen while failing to address the quality of those diverse representations. This allows corporate elites in the television industry to associate themselves with diversity without meaningfully engaging with the concept as a political project.

The result of plastic representation then, is the circulation of "normatively white characters who happen to be of color" (Warner, 2017: 36). This observation speaks to the idea that diverse representation on screen is generally oriented towards a dominant normative center, meaning that meaningful aspects of diverse identity are downplayed. Leong's (2021) concept of identity entrepreneurship is particularly relevant here as outgroup members are offered pathways to legitimacy, but only by adhering to the terms set by the ingroup. Molina-Guzmán (2018) recognizes this pattern in Latinx representation, as such characters are frequently depicted in one-dimensional, stereotypical ways. They are cast as racially ambiguous, which implies that all Latinx people are more or less the same; and they are more likely to be women, who are perceived as less threatening as their sexuality can be contained within femininity. Quinn-Puerta's (2019) assessment of *Jane the Virgin* (CW, 2014-2019) concurs with these points, as she argues that the show employs a top-down

approach to Latinx identity construction by unifying all Latinx people through cultural markers such as the Spanish language, soccer, and issues of immigration reform, which can have a homogenizing effect. Quinn-Puerta (2019) is critical of how the three lead characters in *Jane the Virgin* are depicted as being from Venezuela, even though the three lead actresses are all of Puerto Rican descent. This lack of distinction, Quinn-Puerta (2019) writes, “is toned down to fit with the classic narrative of the U.S. as a melting pot” (174), ignoring political difference in favor of racial harmony. In a similar strategy, queer representation on screen is frequently offset by emphasizing other, more mainstream factors of identity. Becker (2006) and Martin (2021) both note how queer characters on television tend to be white, male, and middle/upper-class, a pattern that discussions of ‘the gay 1990s’ tend to ignore. Henderson (2013) recognizes how class is used as a legitimating facet of identity for queer people on screen, noting that, “comportment, family, and modes of acquisition are the class markers of queer worth, pulling characters and scenarios toward a normative middle, but not without deploying an array of other class meanings and values” (34). The idea that queer people might also identify as working-class is thus diminished as queer characters pursue traditional markers of class ascension. Leong (2021) considers the four queer male leads of *Queer Eye* (Netflix, 2018–) in relation to these tendencies, describing them as identity entrepreneurs who add nuance to queer identity, but in ways that satisfy ingroup values. This in turn comports with the imperatives of those who control the show’s production and distribution. To reiterate, the limited pathways of legitimacy offered to marginalized individuals produce narrow and conservative conceptions of diversity on screen.

Following the patterns of prestige television outlined earlier, the profitability of diversity has been zealously pursued by streaming services. Netflix, for example, has heavily invested in publicizing work with diverse creators and actors, and in funding diversity initiatives internally and externally. Netflix also self-identifies as a progressive brand on social media outlets (Havas and Horeck, 2021; Higson, 2021; Shattuc, 2020). While such initiatives have not been devoid of meaningful results (Havas and Horeck, 2021), the neoliberal imperative of profit warrants skepticism, and Netflix’s activity internationally shows how the business of diversity operates. They have invested in localizing their content for countries around the world through work with translators (Shattuc, 2020), but only a small percentage of its content outside of the US is locally originated (Higson, 2021). Shattuc (2020) expresses concern that Netflix’s global strategy is the epitome of American imperialism, generating a monoculture through storytelling and pushing out small local producers who cannot compete with its infrastructure. Higson (2021) and Harvey (2020) concur, noting how both Hollywood and Netflix have frequently engaged with the strategy of producing content that will appeal to global audiences while flattening cultural difference in the process. Therefore, Netflix’s international strategy tends towards the logic of plastic representation, as profitability and wide appeal are prioritized at the expense of serving local cultures. Although pursuing diversity through prestige content by streaming services may be a relatively new feature of the television business, it also reflects longstanding strategies of profit accumulation evident since the earliest days of cable.

As diversity on screen expands, albeit primarily in the hollow forms outlined here, social inequalities in the real world persist along identity lines (Molina-Guzmán, 2018; Petermon, 2018; Squires, 2014). Returning to Seamster and Charron-Chénier’s (2017) idea of predatory inclusion, it is necessary to consider how diverse representation on screen obfuscates the actual withholding of social and state support for marginalized groups. Neoliberal diversity implies that collective identity factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class are not relevant in determining life

outcomes despite considerable evidence to the contrary (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Martin, 2021; Molina-Guzmán, 2018; Petermon, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018; Squires, 2014). Neoliberal ideology works to restructure our sense of identity so that individuals see themselves as individual economic beings first, and social beings second (Wrenn, 2014). Such individuals are implored to become entrepreneurs of the self, with social identity repurposed as just another way to maximize one's economic contributions (Ventura, 2012). Importantly, in this construction, social identity does not address unequal economic outcomes because all individuals are supposedly equal in the eyes of the marketplace and each individual is responsible for their own success or failure (Harvey, 2005; Ventura, 2012).

If predatory inclusion occurs as marginalized groups are welcomed into the marketplace without acknowledging how the marketplace is structured to reproduce marginalization, then the television industry contributes to this process by (falsely) promoting itself as a space where identity is no longer a structural barrier to participation. As previously noted, the television industry is controlled by a small number of wealthy elites. Although some gains in representation have been made behind the camera (Ramón, 2022), upper-class white males continue to hold most of the decision-making power (Byerly, 2019; Molina-Guzmán, 2018). To distract attention from this reality, marginalized individuals appear as token proof that anyone can succeed in the television industry with hard work (Petermon, 2018). Petermon (2018) considers how prolific television producer Shonda Rhimes has been used by the industry to this end. As a neoliberal token who legitimated ABC's status as a network that produces diverse content, she is well-known for her commitment to colorblind casting and other superficial diversity tactics. Rhimes's productions have become increasingly strident in recent years, but she had to embrace colorblind ideology early in her career to gain enough industry power to produce political content. Rhimes is therefore another example of an identity entrepreneur (Leong, 2021), an outgroup member who had to earn legitimacy by conforming to ingroup demands. Rhimes also continues to be a rare example of a woman of color having a position of significant power in the television industry.

More broadly, normalizing the appearance of diverse faces on screen, particularly through prestige television, lends support to the assumption that social identity is not a relevant indicator of inequality. As Banet-Weiser (2018) writes in the context of commodified feminism, it is "as if *seeing* or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures" (5). Indeed, consumers in a neoliberal society are incentivized to ignore the political dimensions of identity politics, and so seeing diverse representation on screen becomes an attractive substitute for meaningful political engagement. On-screen representation is a powerful force driving the neoliberalization of identity politics because it provides highly visible 'evidence' that identity is no longer an obstacle—the prestige television business willingly accommodates all identities into its economic model. This is not to say that representation is wholly lacking in value, but as Fraser (2009) argues, "justice today requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition." There must be deliberation upon both of these goals along intersectional identity lines, instead of simply prioritizing the recognition of cultural differences in public spaces.

Constructing the neoliberal television audience

Of course, audiences are not merely passive recipients (Hall, 2001), and it is unreasonable to assume that all television viewers accept plastic representation as unequivocally valuable and meaningful. As an industry upheld by viewership, television business elites are faced with the

problem of satisfying diverse audiences with varying relationships to neoliberal ideology. And yet with so much concentrated power, industry elites are ultimately free to construct their imagined normative audience: homogenous, individuated, and comfortably off. This justifies the production of broad, depoliticized content with often tenuous ties to markers of prestige.

Accurate access to viewership has historically been elusive in the television industry, as ratings systems such as Nielsen approximate broadcast and cable audiences based on a representative sample (Meehan, 2020). In this regard, Meehan (2020) argues that ratings production has always been shaped by the needs of advertisers: “The truism that ratings are scientific measurements is simply false: ratings are products manufactured by a monopolist within constraints of cost and demand” (358). Becker (2006) coined the term ‘slumpy’—socially liberal, urban-minded professionals—to describe the highly-sought after ideal-typical broadcast and cable audiences of the 1990s. Becker (2006) notes that ‘edgy’ and adult programming was specifically designed for such audiences. Using the consumption of multiculturalism as a marker of cultural identity, the ‘slumpy’ viewer was able to advance diversity as a social cause while also supporting neoliberal economic policies that emphasize meritocracy over structural inequality (Becker, 2006). Returning to the cultural hierarchy that accompanies prestige television, Vaage (2016) has argued that such programming was designed to catch and sustain the attention of affluent, highly educated audiences who were constructed as superior to those who enjoyed ‘regular’ television. Prestige television audiences are encouraged to see themselves as high-status tastemakers with the ability to legitimize certain television shows as worthy of artistic consideration (Rawlins, 2023; Samuels, 2023). This reifies the social desirability designated for these shows by advertisers. ‘Slumpy’ viewers—and their correlates, prestige television viewers—are thus ideal neoliberal consumers content to engage with plastic representations of diversity.

Marginalized groups have, especially in the past, been excluded from conceptions of a valuable television audience. Martin’s (2021) analysis of queer Black representation provides a compelling example of this. He discusses the precarious nature of Black programming on television, which has been dictated by fluctuating perceptions of Black audience value. These audiences, assumed to be homogenous and homophobic, were expected to consume any instance of non-mainstream Black representation regardless of quality (Martin, 2021). Martin (2021) notes how Black creators in the industry are disciplined to conform or risk not working again. This reinforces a loop in which Black audiences are compelled to consume hollow representations of identity in order to validate the value of Black programming, but in doing so they also reinforce the production of hollow representations.

Shankar (2020) argues that there has been a recent shift in media marketing strategies—away from segmenting audiences into identity groups and towards diversity initiatives that aim to construct a singular, multicultural audience—which appears progressive but actually reinstates the white gaze. Audiences are expected to orient themselves around a white center of multicultural harmony, which eschews any signs of difference or conflict between groups (Dávila, 2008; Molina-Guzmán, 2018; Squires, 2014). Marginalized audience groups are therefore reimagined and reconstructed in terms of their economic potential. For example, Becker (2006) notes how queer people have been constructed as an attractive audience through marketing strategies that position them as wealthy, hip, and having money to spend (in the absence of children). Similarly, Dávila (2008) argues that Latinx audiences are increasingly recognized as valuable the more they assimilate into white culture and become less threatening. As the primary goal of media producers is to prioritize the comforts and tastes of comfortably off audiences, stories about marginalized groups are often told from ingroup perspectives. Becker’s (2006) concept of ‘straight panic’ is

indicative of this trend. The common narrative trope on television is to tell supposedly queer stories that are actually about heterosexual characters' growing anxieties about sexual identity. Molina-Guzmán (2018) gives a more ambivalent example of hipster racism, which involves the ironic use of discriminatory language and humor. In particular, Molina-Guzmán (2018) notes that single-camera television comedies without laugh tracks—a key development of comedic prestige television (Newman and Levine, 2011)—do not always indicate who is supposed to be laughed at when identity-based humor is employed. This can have the unintended effect of reinforcing stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes while creating a space for audiences to laugh at identity issues yet still feel progressive. Molina-Guzmán (2018) cites the example of the character Gloria on *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–2020), who aligns with hypersexual Latina stereotypes that are used for comedic purposes in an otherwise conflict-free upper-class environment. However, she also recognizes how Latinx viewers may find oppositional readings and appreciate Gloria's distinct perspective.

Streaming television services have perhaps the greatest potential to disrupt this traditional practice of audience construction because, unlike broadcast and cable television, they have direct access to data about their consumers (Arnold, 2017). Instead of focusing on generalized demographic groups, it is more common for streaming services to segment audiences into more targeted groups based on 'taste communities' (Shattuc, 2020), and to emphasize the individualized experience that their service offers (Higson, 2021; Tryon, 2015). Instead of constructing profitable imagined audiences, streaming services can shape their existing audiences in a way that maximizes profitability. This is certainly not a new phenomenon; Newman and Levine (2011) have pointed out how the cultivation of audience loyalty and fandom through prestige television is an economic strategy that allows television producers to promote consumer behaviour through sales of DVDs and other merchandise. But the viewing practices of streaming audiences have expanded the repertoire of strategies available. In one notable instance, Netflix has worked to create an association between binge-viewing and prestige television by portraying streaming audiences as active participants in the viewing process. Mittell (2015) argues that high audience engagement has become a key component of prestige television, as complex and disorienting narratives are produced with the expectation that audiences will enjoy combining pieces of the story over time while speculating about future outcomes. Netflix series such as the rebooted *Arrested Development* (FOX, 2003–2006; Netflix, 2013–2019) and *Love* (Netflix, 2016–2018) are just two examples of shows that have purposefully played with time, narrative cliffhangers, and unconventional story structure to appeal specifically to binge-viewing audiences (Hemingway, 2021). Steiner's (2021) analysis of Netflix's marketing campaign illustrates how they have put considerable effort into rejecting couch potato stereotypes and moral panic about binge-viewing by satirizing these concepts. Netflix in turn "construct[s] binge-viewers (and their company) as savvy, agentic and self-aware" (89). Some television viewers had previously engaged with binge-viewing through DVD box sets; but once streaming was available and became popular, Netflix reshaped 'rogue' viewing practices into more desirable forms (Jenner, 2021).

In theory, direct access to user data allows streaming companies to cater directly to audience tastes and build accurate personalized recommendations (Arnold, 2017). Some have predicted that this industry shift would facilitate the 'long tail phenomenon,' in which the unlimited space of the internet would allow for a plurality of niche options that would eventually overtake the consumption of popular content (Napoli, 2016). Napoli (2016) points out how, in contrast to these predictions, Netflix has significantly shrunk its library over time as it began focusing most of its

spending efforts on producing and distributing high budget original content, a pattern that other streaming services have followed (see Petruska, 2023). While streaming services tend to speak of algorithms and data mining as liberatory for individual viewers, critics argue that they create filter bubbles and echo chambers by pushing consumers to watch content they already like (Higson, 2021; Napoli, 2016). Napoli (2016) thus explains that predictions of the long tail phenomenon did not come to fruition, as diverse offerings of content conflict with neoliberal business goals:

From this standpoint, the strategic necessity of serving the long tail declines as information about audiences' preferences increases over time. So, for instance, Netflix's vast knowledge of its subscribers' viewing preferences and behaviours should help the company in being more selective in deciding which content options to obtain or retain. (350)

Arnold (2017) points out that audiences could once only be pursued, but now can be governed. The idea that algorithms and data mining can liberate individuals mirrors neoliberal rhetoric that promises individual freedom through the marketplace (Harvey, 2005; Ventura, 2012), but accumulating knowledge about individual viewers instead reduces them to pieces of data that can be analyzed (Arnold, 2017). Identity factors once attributed to imagined audiences now appear in the streaming environment as descriptors of content. Thus, labels like 'strong female lead' offer reductive assumptions of who watches certain content and why (Arnold, 2017). Arnold (2017) concludes that in the streaming business, human agency is an encumbrance. Accordingly, even industry shifts that have the potential to meaningfully disrupt the traditional television business are inevitably repackaged to fit neoliberal goals and strip identity of its political meaning. Prestige television is designed to bring in desirable audiences to enhance profitability, but these audiences are imagined constructions, rather than real audiences that have more complicated relationships to representations of identity on screen.

Case study: Max

I now examine the television streaming service Max as emblematic of the themes just discussed. As a streaming service that has operated under the corporate umbrella of three different parent companies in a brief span of time, Max is best understood as a product of neoliberal business practices that position television streaming within wider corporate goals. Its original content programming strategy, meanwhile, illustrates the limits of a business model predicated on the neoliberalization of identity politics. Since launching Max, CEO David Zaslav has reduced costs and pursued projects that superficially engage with elements of prestige television. While these decisions have caused public backlash, it is unclear whether Zaslav and the company will have to face meaningful consequences, or whether these decisions will be ultimately accepted by the public.

Although the streaming service 'Max' was officially launched in May 2023, from 2020 it existed as 'HBO Max' under the corporate umbrella of media conglomerate Time Warner (Spangler, 2023). According to Steirer (2023), the business model of HBO Max under Time Warner prioritized creative freedom and single high pay deals in line with the strategy of HBO and streaming services. When AT&T bought Time Warner in 2018, the new conglomerate restructured HBO Max to prioritize brand synergy. This diluted the brand recognition of HBO, as more content was produced with fewer funds (Steirer, 2023). In 2022, AT&T sold Time Warner to Discovery Inc. to form the merged company Warner Bros. Discovery. Soon after, the streaming service was renamed 'Max,' further separating it from the prestige of the HBO brand (as content from the

Discovery library was added to the new service) (Spangler, 2023). Max is therefore a product of neoliberal economics, as corporate consolidation positioned Max not as a surrogate of the HBO brand but as a contributor to a corporation's broader profit ecosystem.

One of the first high-profile releases on the platform following the name change was music drama series *The Idol* (HBO/MAX, 2023), which premiered on HBO and Max on 4 June 2020. Substantial anticipation for the series was reinforced by emphasizing its prestige elements, including gritty themes about toxicity in the music industry and modern stardom. Also important was the series' association with two auteurs: musician Abel Tesfaye, known as The Weeknd, and Sam Levinson, creator of the hit prestige television show *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–) (Geraets, 2023). *The Idol* had a budget of \$75 million, which included expensive reshoots after a major personnel change mid-production (Haile, 2023). But the show was ultimately cancelled after being critically panned, scoring a 19% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Viewers were inspired to mock the show on social media by critiquing Tesfaye's acting and Levinson's writing, among other elements (Haile, 2023). *The Idol* exemplifies how the strategy of hollowing out prestige television and focusing on its individual attributes, rather than its stylistic integrity, can backfire for television producers with significant economic consequences (Cardwell, 2007). Geraets (2023) considered *The Idol* as a form of prestige television in which being edgy replaced quality. Haile (2023) described the show as "the prestigious television it strived and failed to masquerade as" (para. 1). *The Idol* billed itself as a satire, but critics have likened it to torture porn, a male fantasy and/or romanticization of a time in the music industry when people were not discussing issues of toxic masculinity and rape culture (Goldberg, 2023; Haile, 2023). This range of critical commentary speaks not only to the hollowing out of prestige, but more specifically to the neoliberalization of identity politics. Centered on a white female pop star surrounded by physically diverse identities, *The Idol* failed to generate meaningful social critique that should have been readily accessible in a television show about a notoriously discriminatory industry (Goldberg, 2023; Haile, 2023).

The Idol illustrates Max's struggle to effectively launch new programming. Nielsen's 2023 report found that streaming grew from the previous year but was primarily driven by library content, rather than originals. Max made the top ten list for library content twice—with *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-2019) in the fourth spot, and *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) in eighth—but did not rank at all in the top ten list for original content (Nielsen, 2024). These findings underscore a changing television streaming landscape, as well as Max's precarious position within it. Lending further credence to the idea that Max is not doing well, reports surfaced in December 2023 that Warner Bros. Discovery was considering a merger with Paramount Global (Fischer, 2023). In short, Max struggled with the paradox of cutting costs and innovating simultaneously.

Max's most substantial cost-cutting efforts, as referenced earlier, began when Max made headlines for shelving the completed film *Batgirl*. Since then, over 60 titles have been removed, including a number of original series produced for HBO or HBO Max. Other streaming services have followed suit to reap the benefits of tax write-offs related to residuals and licensing fees (Salazar and Vilas-Boas, 2022; Vlessing, 2023; Whitten and Rizzo, 2023). But Max's CEO David Zaslav has continually attracted negative publicity for starting the trend, from getting booed during his commencement address at Boston University, to being mocked online for the glitchy launch of the Max app. He has been broadly characterized as a money-obsessed villain who does not care about content or struggling members of the television industry (Adamczyk and Samuel, 2023). Recalling Napoli's (2016) assessment of the failed long tail phenomenon, television business elites, especially those at Max, appear to be recommitting more firmly to a television landscape where

only the most profitable content survives. It is claimed that such an approach is necessary to serve the needs of the marketplace while pulling in record profits, a disconnect illuminated by striking members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and SAG-AFTRA from across the film-television industry (Wilkinson, 2023). This means that television viewers can no longer feel confident that their favorite titles, even widely popular ones, will remain available for viewing.

Although 2023 was a tumultuous year for television and especially for Max, it is unclear how, or whether, the company will be subject to consequences for prioritizing profit over content and viewers. For the past three years, entertainment outlet *Vulture* has published a ranking of streaming services based on how much they're spending on content, how fast they are growing, and what industry insiders say about them. For the past two, Max has been given the top spot. Insiders quoted in the 2023 edition noted that even with all of the negative press around content cancellations and removals, Max continues to produce the most in-demand content, even if that mostly comes from the HBO side of the brand (Adalian, 2023).

Conclusion: television in conflict

As long as neoliberal ideology dominates American culture, the television industry will be shaped by economic policies that maintain wealth inequality and facilitate processes of elite capture, identity capitalism, and predatory inclusion. The goal of maximizing content profitability has led to conditions in which television industry elites are able to appear progressive and in service to television viewers while prioritizing the accumulation of wealth. This results in the production of prestige television content that is lacking in representational depth and meaningful critique. While the neoliberal sensibility dictating television production has operated mostly unchecked for decades, recent industry developments, as apparent in the case of Max, highlight how the need to produce high quality content and the need to produce maximum profits can come into conflict. There is certainly reason for discontent among television viewers, who now face an uncertain streaming market and a realization of the economic inequality in entertainment industries illuminated by WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes. Two questions remain. Will audiences continue to factor these cost-cutting measures into shifting expectations of the television industry? Will the very notion of prestige fall away from television as the medium moves further away from the high art status it once strived towards?

Author Bio

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