

3-6-2006

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Recommended Citation

This article first appeared in Drew, D.E. and Burrell, H. (2006, March 6). Too Many Options Dilute Shared Experience. *Christian Science Monitor*, p. 9. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0306/p09s01-coop.html>

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Too many options dilute shared experience

By David E. Drew, Hedley Burrell / March 6, 2006 at 12:03 pm EST

CLAREMONT, CALIF. AND SARASOTA, FLA.

Despite the red carpet glitter of the Oscars, it is no secret that Hollywood has had a far from perfect year at the box office.

And unfortunately for Tinsel Town, its problems go beyond the obvious need for more successful films.

The way we experience both movies and television has evolved. We don't do things together the way we once did. We rent movies and watch them at home rather than going to a local movie theater with family and friends. Box office returns suffer and the centrality of film in our lives is weakened.

The same fragmentation is true in television. Sadly, the kind of cultural reference points provided by the likes of Johnny Carson, Lucille Ball, Jackie Gleason, and more - including the superstar network news anchors in their prime - are fading. They provided a snug sense of intimacy that comes from a shared common experience.

The result? Significant social change brought on by audience fragmentation. The root cause? A proliferation of entertainment options impelled by niche-driven marketing.

Consider: A woman who moved to the US Virgin Islands from the mainland told friends some years back: "When I watch a network TV show, I have a sense of being connected to the mainland. It's the idea that we all watch the same shows."

Now, though, many will be watching different entertainment and news shows. Competition abounds on cable and the Internet. Sophisticated polling and sampling techniques have made it possible to target TV shows, movies, and sports events to the precise population subgroup the sponsor seeks as customers.

Fifty years ago, there were 16 instantly recognized Major League Baseball teams; now there are 30. In the 1970s, everyone knew that Muhammad Ali was the heavyweight boxing champion. Do you recognize these names: Lamon Brewster, John Ruiz, Chris Byrd, and Vitali Klitschko? During the past year, each was called

"the heavyweight boxing champion of the world" by a different sanctioning body. Why? Because by doing so, an unexciting boxing match between little-known athletes can be marketed as a "heavyweight title fight."

There used to be three dominant TV channels. Now, cable and satellite options have expanded the channel choices into the hundreds. Bruce Springsteen laments in song that he has 57 channels, but there is "nothin' on."

Back in the 1950s, there was a predictable diet of movies - dramas, comedies, and Westerns. Films more readily attracted multiple generations.

Recently, Giovanni Zoppé of the Zoppé Family Circus told The New York Times that only at the circus can he look out at the audience and see "an 80-year-old person laughing, a 40-year-old person laughing, a 30-year-old person laughing, all the way down to a 2- or 3-year-old."

Without question, of course, today's market-driven diversification has yielded wonderful choices for the choosy consumer. For example, recently a Pittsburg football fan found she could cheer on the Steelers in the NFL playoffs, while her European husband watched soccer.

But what we gain as individuals we lose as a society. Consider other examples of a fragmented communal life:

Suburban soccer parents driving their children to and from games, often over considerable distances, have created another major generational change. The youngsters, compared with previous generations playing pickup games, are not together beforehand and leave shortly after the game. Thus, the shared experience is watered down.

Sequential use of office space (so-called office "hoteling") and couples working different shifts and sleeping different hours further diminish the shared experience. Family members withdraw by surfing the Internet. Families once routinely ate dinner together. It's a different story now.

Some 100 years ago, sociologist Emile Durkheim identified the importance of social cohesion and the destructive effects of its absence.

About 50 years later, the producers of such discussed-around-the-water-cooler TV shows as "I Love Lucy," "Gunsmoke," and "The Honeymooners" clearly understood the value of the shared experience.

And today we know that such experiences not only shape a society, they are linked to better health, lower crime rates, and improved learning.

Perhaps we can take our variety of interests and make a point of explaining and sharing them with others. Failure to do so could waste the valuable social capital that such sharing might engender. And social capital, in the view of the World

Bank, one of the world's largest sources of development assistance, "is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society - it is the glue that holds them together."

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