



Media Convergence and Cultural Status

Legitimizing Television

Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine

LEGITIMATING TELEVISION

Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status explores how and why television is gaining a new level of cultural respectability in the 21st century. Once looked down upon as a “plug-in drug” offering little redeeming social or artistic value, television is now said to be in a creative renaissance, with critics hailing the rise of Quality series such as *Mad Men* and *30 Rock*. Likewise, DVDs and DVRs, web video, HDTV, and mobile devices have shifted the longstanding conception of television as a household appliance toward a new understanding of TV as a sophisticated, high-tech gadget.

Newman and Levine argue that television’s growing prestige emerges alongside the convergence of media at technological, industrial, and experiential levels. Television is permitted to rise in respectability once it is connected to more highly valued media and audiences. Legitimation works by denigrating “ordinary” television associated with the past, distancing the television of the present from the feminized and mass audiences assumed to be inherent to the “old” TV. It is no coincidence that the most validated programming and technologies of the convergence era are associated with a more privileged viewership. The legitimization of television articulates the medium with the masculine over the feminine, the elite over the mass, reinforcing cultural hierarchies that have long perpetuated inequalities of gender and class.

Legitimizing Television urges readers to move beyond the question of taste—whether TV is “good” or “bad”—and to focus instead on the cultural, political, and economic issues at stake in television’s transformation in the digital age.

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For Leo and Noah

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1

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Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.
Pierre Bourdieu¹

In November 2008, the creator of the NBC series *Heroes* tried to explain why his show's Nielsen ratings were falling. Speaking to the challenges of garnering a regular broadcast audience in an age of DVDs, DVRs, downloads, and streaming video, Tim Kring contended that a serialized drama like *Heroes* suffers in the ratings—measured primarily on the basis of live viewership, and thus not including these new distribution outlets—because the kind of viewers it attracts prefers new ways of accessing media content. As he explained, “Now you can watch [TV] when you want, where you want, how you want to watch it, and almost all of those ways are superior to watching it on air. So [watching it] on air is related to the saps and the dipshits who can't figure out how to watch it in a superior way.”² In Kring's conception, an upscale, sophisticated series like *Heroes* was having trouble succeeding in the ratings because the show and its viewership were a mismatch for television and its typical audience, the “saps” and “dipshits” who tune in each week to follow a narrative, with nothing better to do than to be at home, in front of the set, sitting through the commercials.

Critics, bloggers, and TV fans pounced on Kring, eager to hold up new technologies as the savior rather than the downfall of Quality TV.³ Yet at least one prominent writer, *TV Week*'s Josef Adalian, endorsed the logic of Kring's remarks, pointing out that, “Since advertisers really only care about those folks who watch commercials within three days of a show's airing, anyone smart or busy or young enough to figure out how to avoid watching a series in real time doesn't really count.”⁴ Adalian solidified his case by contrasting those programs

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that are *not* frequently time-shifted with the “cooler, more intricate” shows that he and his readers clearly valued. For Adalian, the polar opposite of a show like *Heroes* was the game show *Deal or No Deal*, and he underscored his analysis by noting that *Deal* was one of the highest rated—and least DVRd—shows of the moment.⁵ The popularity of that series, and the “old-fashioned” viewing practices that accompanied it, were the “mass” against which the “class” experiences of DVRs and dramas like *Heroes* were distinguished.

This kerfuffle over Kring’s remarks illuminates a key set of tensions marking American television during the contemporary period, as the cultural value of the medium undergoes negotiation and revision. Serialized dramas are heralded as a chief reason that “television is just better” than ever before, even as certain other genres and programs are routinely derided. Showrunners like Kring are well-known public figures, credited as both the creators and destroyers of TV greatness, even as many of the medium’s production personnel remain anonymous. And new technologies like the DVR, DVD, web video, and HD are seen to be allowing for new ways of appreciating television, often on the viewer’s own terms, even as the “saps” and “dipshits” are still watching “live” TV with commercials.⁶ In this era, an emergent set of discourses proposes that television has achieved the status of great art, or at least of respectable culture, disturbing long-standing hierarchies that placed the medium far below literature, theater, and cinema in social, cultural, and technological worth. At the same time, the very discourses that have denigrated and delegitimated the medium for many decades persist.

When *Heroes* debuted in 2006, it was among the most buzzed about of its crop of new network shows. It was presented as exemplary of a new kind of TV storytelling: a large, multicultural cast, intricate stories continuing week to week, episodes labeled as “Chapters” that were parts of longer arcing “Volumes,” deliberate connections to the worlds of comic books and feature films.⁷ The program capitalized on new experiments in TV storytelling and promotion, embracing transmedia formats such as webisodes and an online comic as a way to extend its story world and engage viewers, in particular the passionate fan audience the series courted by previewing the pilot at the annual Comic-Con convention.⁸ The program was also directly tied to the realm of TV scholarship, with *Heroes* producers taking inspiration from Henry Jenkins’s *Convergence Culture* for their transmedia efforts and Kring participating in a panel at the 2010 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, as well as commenting on a blog post about the show written by TV scholar Jason Mittell.⁹

Hoping to follow in the footsteps of ABC’s *Lost*, *Heroes* sought the kind of respectability and cultural cachet other series at the time were finding. But Kring’s remarks reveal the ideological implications of television seeking such a rise in status. As his comments exposed, and as the reaction of writers like Adalian reinforced, the cultural legitimization of television is premised upon a rejection and a denigration of “television” as it has long existed, whether in the form of conventional programming (*Deal or No Deal*), low-tech viewing (real time, with

commercials), or the elite conception of a mass audience too passive or stupid to watch differently. Cultural legitimization may seem to be an important step forward for those who value, enjoy, and feel invested in television. But it is premised on a set of hierarchies that ultimately reinforce unjust social and cultural positions. In the shape it is taking, the legitimization of television does more harm than good.

Legitimizing Television examines these discourses of television's changing cultural value as they are emerging and struggling for dominance. Such discourses seem to be according respect to a medium that has long been denied it, challenging prevailing cultural hierarchies to welcome, progressive ends. But discourses of television's cultural legitimization do not dismantle prevailing structures of status. They perpetuate them by seeking to move television up in the contemporary cultural hierarchy while leaving in place the distinctions of value and respectability that denigrated the medium in the first place. The hierarchies themselves persist, with some genres, instances, technologies, and experiences of television positioned below their legitimated counterparts. Because those distinctions reproduce unequal structures of social position more generally—certainly those of class and gender—we find them inherently troubling. As a result, we both document emergent discourses of legitimization and critique them, seeking to expose and denaturalize their ideological underpinnings, as well as opening lines of inquiry into other ways to consider the medium. We historicize and contextualize the rise of legitimization discourses as they are intensifying in the *convergence era*, the contemporary period of the economic, technological, aesthetic, and experiential merging of media.

Legitimation and the Coming of Convergence

In the mid-twentieth century, television was established as society's most important medium for the communication of information and entertainment. In its first several decades, TV in the United States and around the world meant over-the-air broadcasting received by relatively small, standard-definition, picture-tube sets. In the U.S., the big three networks commanded up to 90 percent of prime time audiences, and viewers watched programs only as they aired. Under these conditions and in the eyes of cultural commentators of all stripes—from the most popular and colloquial to the most erudite and intellectual—television's cultural significance revolved around its status as a commercial medium experienced collectively, mostly in domestic spaces. This led to a number of negative associations based on the perceived class and gender identities of the mass audience. During the network era, television sometimes achieved a degree of respectability from the perspective of elites for its public affairs and educational programs or its evening dramas. On the whole, however, the dominant view of television was as a waste of time at best, and possibly also a source of serious and widespread social problems. Television was seldom considered as an artistic medium, and lay people and scholars alike more often considered its value (or lack of it) in sociological rather than aesthetic terms.

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Since CBS, NBC, and ABC began to share their viewers with numerous new channels, fracturing the mass audience into multiple narrow segments, television's reputation has changed for the better. Within the U.S., and in much of the western world, many prime time programs are considered as artworks, and intellectual culture has become hospitable to respectful and admiring discussions of some fictional TV shows. Experiences of television have changed as well. Screens have become wider, larger, flatter, and high-definition. A cluster of digital technologies has built on the potentials of remote controls and video cassettes to give television viewers means of "programming" their own experience. No longer defined by the oligopoly of three national networks whose content is viewed as an essentially live and continuous flow of programming, the U.S. television landscape is marked by a multitude of broadcast, cable, and satellite channels, and by numerous new technologies used to access content. In our convergence era, many media come together and begin to blur into one another. Movies are watched most often on television sets, television shows are frequently screened on personal computers and mobile devices, and all of the electronic media have become digital. Television's cultural status has shifted as one consequence of these developments in media industries and technologies.

The cultural legitimization of television has in some ways been an ongoing project since the emergence of TV broadcasting in the 1940s. As Chapter 2 charts, processes of legitimization intensified following the Quality TV trends of the 1970s and 1980s, when the fragmentation of the audience made for increased opportunities to direct programming at sophisticated, affluent niches. Highbrow publications began to treat upscale television shows in terms once reserved for more established arts. More students studied television from an aesthetic perspective, and more scholars taught and published about television in this same mode of appreciation. Beginning in the late 1990s, a number of developments marked a growing shift in the medium's cultural positioning, making discourses of television's improvement more powerful and pervasive. The convergence era of the twenty-first century has intensified this. The introduction of TV shows on DVD and the TiVo and ReplayTV digital video recorders, along with HDTV and digital sources of content, changed the ways many viewers watched television. Television did not become wholly legitimated upon the debut of *The Sopranos* or the first use of a DVR to pause live TV. Rather, legitimization is an ongoing cultural process that is still incomplete even in its heightened, present state. There are many anticipatory moments of rising legitimacy in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. But in the convergence era this process has come to a head, producing a culture of legitimacy around television that contrasts boldly with the medium's earlier low status even as it continues to rely upon the denigration of some TV.

One of the central strategies employed in discourses of television's legitimization is comparison with already legitimated art forms, such as literature and cinema. Deep immersion in a season of a premium cable drama like *The Sopranos* is thus described by analogy to reading a thick nineteenth-century social realist novel

by Balzac, Dickens, or Tolstoy.¹⁰ But the more ubiquitous legitimating strategy is cinematization: certain kinds of television and certain modes of experiencing television content are aligned with movies and the experience of movies. In the convergence era, premium cable dramas are described as megamovies, flat-panel television sets have high-definition widescreen displays modeled on the film screen, and TV on DVD and web-accessed programming make the viewing of movies and television series more equivalent, allowing for television consumption without antenna reception or cable or satellite subscription. It is seldom flattering to liken a movie to a TV show, but TV shows are routinely praised for being cinematic. When a *Newsweek* critic announced in 2007 that “Television is running circles around the movies,” this was a provocative, counterintuitive statement given the historical valuation of these two media.¹¹ Movies have long been elevated culturally above television, especially since the post-war years of art cinema and *auteurism*, and the subsequent establishment of cinema studies as a humanistic field growing out of literary studies. Legitimation works in part by aligning television with that which has already been legitimated and aestheticized.

It also works by distancing more respectable genres of TV and more technologically advanced modes of watching from those forms and viewing practices rooted in the medium’s past, and associated with less valued audiences who had previously been seen as central to television’s cultural identity—women, children, the elderly, those of lesser class status, people who spend their days at home. Legitimation is deeply invested in discourses of progress and improvement, and it works by elevation of one concept of television at the expense of another. For some kinds of television to be consecrated as art, other kinds must be confirmed in inadequacy. New is elevated over old, active over passive, class over mass, masculine over feminine.

Convergence is a crucial context for legitimation, establishing conditions under which television’s status is being renegotiated. Convergence is not merely a technological process, nor need it refer only to digital media. Television’s convergence is aesthetic and social as much as it is technological, and cinema is as important for television’s convergence as computers. In the context of convergence, movies and television (and, to an extent, video games) become less distinct and more interchangeable. Digital tools such as streaming video and flat-panel HDTV sets bring audiences audiovisual content of many varieties, and investment in historical distinctions between media as art and trash, public and private, serious and frivolous, enduring and ephemeral, are rendered less and less pertinent. Television’s convergence with computers likewise extends beyond technology to the aesthetic and the social, offering new modalities of textual experience and new forms of agency in determining how television is programmed. The historical modes of television textuality and experience rooted in the U.S. network era are revealed in their manifold limitations, as the present of media is valorized at the expense of the past. In this way, television is a problem that convergence solves.

The History and Politics of Taste

Television's improvement in status might seem like a welcome development to champions of the medium and more generally to lovers of popular arts and culture. It might appear to come as a long-overdue affirmation of the value of the popular. The historically low position of television has been the product of distinctions between the more legitimated culture of elites and the more denigrated culture of less powerful social groups. Associations between broadcasting and the mass audience in the home have produced suspicion of TV's social effects and contempt for its textual forms. Thus legitimation might appear to mean that the culture of ordinary people has gained the respect it deserves in the face of highbrow snobbery, or that taste cultures are dissolving into a postmodern, "nobrow" scenario in which distinctions between high and low have collapsed.¹² A number of sociologists have argued that, rather than excluding the popular, elites now often have diverse, *omnivorous* tastes, suggesting that one-time hierarchies are disappearing.¹³

But it would be utopian to believe that social divisions as expressed through cultural tastes could melt away within a highly stratified, advanced consumer-capitalist society. Rather than evidence of a decline in cultural hierarchy as such, the turn toward more omnivorous tastes is a way for elites to distinguish themselves in relation to consumers of lower status with narrower taste preferences. Moreover, rather than dividing between high and low cultures, social taste patterns in the contemporary context often follow divisions *within* popular media. Instead of looking at movies *per se* as the culture of the masses, they are categorized in numerous ways, such as Hollywood blockbuster vs. art house or independent film.¹⁴ Rock 'n' roll is no longer the devil's music, but within the world of popular recordings we distinguish between a more corporate and mainstream major label sound and a more authentic and subcultural indie rock.¹⁵ It is not sufficient to note that movies, popular music, and television have gained legitimacy without considering how systems of value operate *within* these media. Distinctions between kinds of television programs—multi-camera versus single-camera sitcoms, daytime soap operas versus prime time serialized dramas—are one way that legitimation functions in contemporary television, as Chapters 4 and 5 explore, respectively.

Distinctions such as these are matters of taste, and taste can be a quite contentious topic, especially as it is so central to constituting individual identity. Judgments of taste might seem purely personal and merely aesthetic, but they are always products of social situations. The deepest function of taste distinction is to reproduce the dominant social structure, to perpetuate unequal divisions by class and other social groupings. Taste, argues Pierre Bourdieu, is a system through which "the social order . . . is inscribed in people's minds."¹⁶ This inscription is generally hidden from our direct perception, naturalized as true value and legitimate hierarchy. Taste denies that it is socially produced; such judgments

function as “a system of classificatory schemes which may only very partially become conscious.”¹⁷ The work of analyzing patterns of taste judgment and classification is thus to unmask misrecognitions of authentic and autonomous value, bringing to light their political and social functions. Such is the project of this book. We argue that it is a mistake to accept naively that television has grown better over the years, even while such a discourse is intensifying within popular, industrial, and scholarly sites. In contrast, we argue that it is primarily cultural elites (including journalists, popular critics, TV creators and executives, and media scholars) who have intensified the legitimization of television by investing the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return.

Bourdieu argues that tastes are markers of classes, reproducing identities by forming common points of reference dependent on knowledge and competence particular to a class formation.¹⁸ Social groups mobilize taste to include and exclude, to identify members and keep boundaries. You are what you like: “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.”¹⁹ Social identity is produced through differences not only in economic or social circumstances, but in aesthetic preferences. The system of taste judgments works by joining together groups in common preferences, but also by rejecting the tastes of groups of differing status. “In matters of taste . . . all determination is negation, and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance . . . of the tastes of others.”²⁰ Within the discourse of television’s legitimization, we see this powerful negation through the construction of divergent conceptions of television texts, technologies, and audiences, some of which are elevated to a newly respectable status and some of which are associated with the medium’s past and its historical lower class and feminine identities. Legitimation produces a bifurcation of the medium into good and bad televisions. The new conception of TV as a good cultural object rejects every characteristic of the pre-convergence-era medium, and new technologies and textualities are seen as progressing beyond and improving upon this past. *Legitimizing Television* denaturalizes the logic of this legitimization and by doing so reveals the implications of television’s shifting status.

One way of appreciating the dynamics of television’s changing valuation is by considering earlier instances of hierarchies revised and reversed. American cultural history offers a number of examples of forms of popular culture rising in legitimacy, and television’s change in cultural status in many ways follows an established script. Lawrence W. Levine has shown that what we think of as the fine arts, such as symphonic music, opera, and Shakespeare, were part of the popular culture of nineteenth-century America. Performances of Shakespearean plays and Italian operas were common to rich and poor Americans before social changes around the turn of the twentieth century led to greater distinction between classes and their experiences of dramatic performance. By tracing this history, Levine argues that categories like high and low are not permanent or natural,

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but undergo negotiation with the emergence of new circumstances. “Because the primary categories of culture have been products of ideologies which were always subject to modifications and transformations, the perimeters of our cultural divisions have been permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable.”²¹ Paul DiMaggio’s study of American opera, dance, and theater in the early twentieth century represents a similar historical trajectory of art forms rising to the status of high culture through the separation of audiences by class and the establishment of institutions such as symphony orchestras and art museums functioning outside of the for-profit commercial sector.²² It might not be possible yet to look at television shows as legitimate culture on the same plane as Mozart or Shakespeare, but at least we may observe their rising status from less to more valued. Perhaps we can consider Quality or cult dramas like *Mad Men* and *Battlestar Galactica* to land somewhere in the middlebrow range, the place, according to Bourdieu, for “major works of minor arts and minor works of major arts.”²³ Even the idea of television shows as major works of a minor art is an improvement over earlier constructions of the medium, as well as a contrast against the valuation of as yet unlegitimated programming like reality TV, local news, game shows, soap operas, and daytime talk shows.

In addition to the rise of popular arts in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century offers further examples of new art forms gaining legitimacy. Jazz music and photography came to be accepted as art forms relatively recently in the histories of music and the visual arts. Jazz was burdened by being an African-American style placing more importance on improvisation, rhythm, and virtuosity than traditional European musical values. Photography had to overcome the obstacle of mechanical reproduction seeming less authentic and original than the work done by painters. Their legitimacy was secured by multiple forces, but especially through acceptance within traditional high art spaces such as museums and concert halls, by the formation of critical discourses and institutions to set the terms of their appreciation, and by being taught in universities. In other words, their legitimacy came via alignment with the already established arts and their modes of appreciation. As in Levine’s narrative of Shakespeare in America, the trajectory of these forms is from “folk art to fine art,” i.e., of elevation from the ordinary culture of the people to the refined sphere of upper class culture.²⁴ An art world arises around such forms to legitimate them.²⁵

An even more proximate comparison case is offered by the movies. Hollywood’s origins were in the mass culture of the storefront nickelodeon theaters of the early twentieth century and their largely working-class audiences, which included many women, immigrants, and children. As is often the case with emerging new media, guardians of culture looked on motion pictures as a moral threat. Their stories and characters were seen as a negative influence and the nickelodeon environment was regarded as dangerous, especially to young and female spectators. The movies improved in class status, and became respectable enough to appeal across all of American society, through efforts at attracting

middle-class audiences.²⁶ Movies adopted the forms of bourgeois narrative such as Victorian melodrama and made their theaters into “picture palaces” distinguished by high-style architecture and attentive service.²⁷ Cinema’s rise in legitimacy was especially well served by the institutions of post-war art cinema, such as film festivals, periodicals, and specialty theaters, and by the concomitant development of a learned cinephilia both in and outside of academia. The discourses of authorship that have thrived within cinephile culture beginning with the French *Cahiers du cinéma* group in the 1950s, and soon thereafter in American film criticism as well, provided a means of distinguishing artistic from merely commercial forms of film and authorized a vanguardist aesthetic approach even to Hollywood studio pictures.²⁸ The importance of authorship for conferring the status of art on the often anonymous and ephemeral objects of popular culture recurs in many examples of legitimation, and has been central to television’s rising status through the figure of the “showrunner” writer-producer whose agency is constructed in ways analogous to the film director’s, as Chapter 3 explores. Through the identification of author/artist personae, popular art forms become more amenable to intellectualization, a key strategy of cultural legitimation.²⁹

Among the lessons from this history of art forms rising in status is the significance of class distinction in legitimating culture, separating higher from lower classes of consumers. One function of legitimation in these historical cases is to manage social change and class mobility, to secure the culture of an elite against the intrusion of undesirable masses, and thus to perpetuate the privilege of the dominant. As Lawrence W. Levine argues, “Popular art is transformed into esoteric or high art at precisely that time when it in fact *becomes* esoteric, that is when it becomes or is rendered inaccessible to the types of people who appreciated it earlier.”³⁰ This is not only a matter of the content of the artwork but also of its literal accessibility. We see this very process in the narrowing of television audiences and the rise of costly premium services, not only the premium cable channels like Showtime and HBO but also digital TV technologies like HDTV, video on demand, DVDs and DVRs, and the numerous other convergence devices that afford internet-dependent or mobile television viewing, as Chapters 6 and 7 explore. Broadband internet service is itself a premium service, a significant monthly expense in addition to the cable or satellite bills many consumers already pay. Such distinctions are visible as well in the burgeoning of both amateur and professional television criticism, which includes fans, journalists, and scholars, a matter we consider throughout, but especially in Chapters 7 and 8. By creating a robust discourse of television analysis, those dedicated to the appreciation of television shows make a new, distinct space for an aestheticized conception of television, in particular the television that is targeted to elite audiences. This functions to divide television viewers by degrees of passion and engagement as well as demographics, and to legitimate those forms of programming that are subjects of admiring, critical appraisal. This discourse of critical reception,

both popular and scholarly, is thus one of the multiple sites for the legitimization of television we analyze and denaturalize.

Television follows an established pattern in rising to higher status, but some aspects of TV's legitimization are specific to the history and context of broadcasting. For one, television has long been feminized. In its network-era conception as a mass medium, it fit well with Andreas Huyssen's argument that, in the modern era, mass culture was feminized culture.³¹ Feminist media scholars have applied this assertion to the cases of network-age radio and television, citing the simultaneous feminization and devaluation of these media across popular, media industry, and scholarly discourses.³² Such discourses articulate television not only to the mass and the popular, but also to the domestic and the commercial, such that the denigration of each of these categories has reinforced the denigration of all. These discourses of denigration arose historically across a multitude of sites. For example, the television set was constructed as a feminized and domestic appliance, not unlike the refrigerators and washing machines also being marketed to homemakers in the post-war years of the medium's consumer debut. As Lynn Spigel has documented, discourses of television's introduction in the U.S. of the late 1940s and early 1950s directly addressed the practicalities of the set's placement in the home, as well as its impact on family life. In ads for TV sets and in journalistic coverage of the medium's arrival, television was presented to women as an object for their concern and attention.³³ Lynne Joyrich points us to the implications of this history for the cultural position of television:

It comes as no surprise that a medium which has been seen as "feminine" is also a medium which is intimately tied to consumerism . . . The "feminization" of the TV viewer thus relates to women's role as primary consumer in our society as much (or more so) as it is derived from the particular dynamics of television spectatorship.³⁴

As a result, she contends, "Gender is not simply a potential *subject matter* for television—it is a classificatory strategy, a structuring system, a very significant *matter for subjects* constituted through its terms of enunciation and address."³⁵ That television has been classified as feminine, and thereby as a less worthy, significant, and serious medium, has been a fact of its history.

With legitimization, however, the association of television with the mass, the commercial, the domestic, and the feminine has begun to shift. The introduction of new television industry strategies to fragment the mass audience, new television technologies promising viewers greater interactivity and mastery, and new modes of textuality and experience function to mark a new identity for TV. This new identity, this cultural elevation, is as much a masculinization as it is a refinement of the medium's class status. The convergence-era validation of television achieves that validation by rejecting the feminized medium that "used to be." Such a discourse of uplift and change embraces a progress narrative that naturalizes classed

and gendered hierarchies with its assumption that moving forward means a shift away from the feminized past and toward a more masculinized future. These discourses do not just reverse the gendering of television and thereby solve its problems of status and legitimacy. Rather, they leave in place the role of gender in classifying media. To make television masculinized rather than feminized reinforces an unjust gendered hierarchy, one that has ramifications for social experience far beyond conceptions of television.

Denaturalizing Legitimation

The many problematic implications of these discourses of legitimation may be challenged and thereby denaturalized. But how does one study legitimation in an effort to denaturalize it? Legitimation is a discursive formation made up of a multitude of expressions that echo and reinforce one another and are made powerful in the breadth and frequency of their appearances. We analyze manifestations of legitimation in a broad array of discourses, focusing on representations of television's value and the significance of the transformations it has undergone since the network era. Legitimation is evident in writings in the trade publications of the entertainment industry, in the popular press, and in blogs and other sites of online publishing and discussion where journalists, scholars, and fans alike find a voice. It is also evident in the perspectives and products of the media industries themselves, the statements of creatives and executives, as well as television shows and the promotional texts surrounding them. It can be observed in the forms and functions of television technologies and the representations of these in advertising and other sites in which new media are promoted and made sense of. Legitimation appears as well in traditional academic discourses, in television scholarship complicit in the reevaluation of television. Ultimately the power of discourses of legitimation is to shape popular understandings of the medium, and *Legitimizing Television* documents these understandings as they emerge in this range of discourses.³⁶ Discourses of legitimation have come to suffuse discussions of television and cultural value, achieving the status of an inescapable common sense, a "new normal" that is all the more powerful for not being named.

Because this discourse is so increasingly pervasive, capturing it in total is hardly possible. It is wholly present in the U.S. context, and that is the focus of our analysis. But it circulates on a global scale, as well. At least in the western world, the most legitimated of American series are warmly received, airing on terrestrial, cable, and satellite television, as well as leading robust lives on DVD. The global reach of American television is not news, of course, but the convergence-era legitimation of American TV may point to a new implication of that reach: a global circulation of legitimation discourses, whether moving from the U.S. outward or enhancing those discourses within the U.S. by virtue of their international reinforcement. As illustration, note how British television scholar Christine Geraghty laments the seeming exclusive interest of British TV scholars and students in (legitimated) U.S.

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programs watched on DVD, rather than domestic fare watched on television proper.³⁷ This is not a phenomenon exclusive to the British academic world, either, as Geraghty quotes a BBC1 Controller as realizing:

It does seem there's a lot of snobbery at work when the media industry spends so much time talking and writing about a handful of shows that are largely watched by people like them . . . I wonder whether we are capable of having a debate about popular drama that includes other shows—shows that reach a broader audience and include a wider part of the creative community—or whether the media will remain obsessed with *Mad Men*, *30 Rock*, and *The Wire*.³⁸

There is clearly work to be done on the new kind of global dominance of certain U.S. programs that legitimation might perpetuate. Questions of how legitimated programming—and discourses of legitimation more broadly—travel worldwide are outside the scope of this analysis, but are of importance to a fuller understanding of the legitimation of television in the convergence era.

Legitimizing Television takes as its focus what we believe to be the primary sites of contemporary discourses of legitimation within the U.S. In the chapters that follow, we examine such discourses as they have intensified over television history, in the stories that are told of a new “Golden Age” of TV programming (Chapter 2), in the rising status of the showrunner-*auteur* (Chapter 3), in the changing valuations of key TV genres such as the sitcom and the primetime drama (Chapters 4 and 5, respectively), in the changing dimensions and qualities of the television image and of television sets themselves (Chapter 6), in the prominence of a host of new technologies that promise new agency for viewers and a new aestheticization of the TV program (Chapter 7), and, finally, in the rise of television studies as an academic field (Chapter 8). We see our project as both history of the present and polemic. The latter might become particularly evident in the final chapter, when we consider the ways that some recent television scholarship perpetuates some of the very discourses of legitimation we critique. In Foucault's terms, this book is a genealogy, tracing the statements and interests that lead to the discursive formation we call legitimation.³⁹

As much as we believe our scope to be sufficiently broad and appropriately focused, there are conceivably other sites that might bear investigation. For example, one might consider how reality series are differentiated from one another. How do some achieve a more legitimated status? Or one might ask whether there are discourses of distinction at work in other, seemingly unlegitimated genres, say, daytime soap opera or talk shows. How might legitimation function in relation to children's programming? How do institutions that have long served as sites of distinction—such as the Emmy Awards—participate in the legitimation specific to the convergence era? How will the new technologies of TV distribution and access that are sure to displace those of the present

differentiate themselves from what has come before, and how will viewers conceive of their experiences with such technology? How is television's legitimation proceeding in other national contexts? The sites we examine are the beginning of what we hope will be a broader exploration of the power of legitimation as a discourse of television production and reception at both popular and scholarly levels, as well as an impetus to attend to the medium in ways that do not perpetuate these cultural hierarchies.

The legitimation of television we document is an increasingly powerful, emergent discourse, but in many respects it is still being formed. Inherently it depends upon a delegitimated "other" television—that of the past but also that of the contemporary genres, production modes, technologies, and practices that do not receive the stamp of legitimacy. Certainly, some instances of television (such as reality shows like *Jersey Shore* or hype-heavy local TV news) continue to be sites of disparagement, just as some modes of experiencing television (such as live over-the-air viewing, commercials and all) continue to be painted as inferior. Even when instances of television are praised and valued by elites, the specter of "television" as it has long been popularly imagined remains, as the *New York Times* review of the 2006 pilot for *Friday Night Lights* blatantly reveals:

Lord, is "Friday Night Lights" good. In fact, if the season is anything like the pilot, this new drama about high school football could be great—and not just television great, but great in the way of a poem or painting, great in the way of art with a single obsessive creator who doesn't have to consult with a committee and has months or years to go back and agonize over line breaks and the color red; it could belong in a league with art that doesn't have to pause for commercials, or casually recap the post-commercial action, or sell viewers on the plot and characters in the first five minutes, or hew to a line-item budget, or answer to unions and studios, or avoid four-letter words and nudity.⁴⁰

Alongside the discourse of television's rising respectability, its aestheticization and sophistication, are these reminders of all that has long kept television entertainment from being equal to other arts. Embedded within the discourse of legitimation are often such allusions to the medium's lurking inferiority, even as we hear of the many ways in which TV may be escaping its historical constraints. Legitimation always works by selection and exclusion; TV becomes respectable through the elevation of one concept of the medium at the expense of another.

There is no doubt that convergence-era television is facing significant change. This book documents the *ideas* that accompany and constitute that change, ideas that we identify as signaling an increased legitimacy for a medium long delegitimated, particularly in elite circles, and particularly along aesthetic and technological lines. In what follows we explore these shifts and tensions of discourse, examining their causes and questioning their consequences.