TV PROGRAMMING AND VIEWER PREFERENCE: THE CASE OF "GENERAL HOSPITAL"

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between producers of TV programming and their intended audience, namely, the extent to which preferences of viewers are taken into account by the producers, and thus the extent to which contents of TV programming reflect existing preferences of viewers. To examine this question, this study uses the example of the long-running American daytime serial "General Hospital" and the fan-initiated campaign called "Save our Soap" aimed to introduce changes into that serial's narrative. Using content analysis to assess the degree of campaign's success, and analyzing the channels and strategies of communication utilized during the campaign and the ways in which audience is conceptualized by television industry, I argue that TV content depends on the way in which "audience" is constructed and imagined by the TV networks rather than on expressed preference of actual viewers. I will also show how the members of "Save our Soap" group demonstrate awareness of the network's concept of audience and attempt to utilize such concept for their own ends.

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the ways in which television – the most ubiquitous form of mass media – influences different aspects of society, including, though by no means limited to, the concepts of class, gender, ethnicity, race and sexuality (Kellner 2009). What has been studied to much lesser extent so far is the degree to which television not only fashions the society, but draws upon discourses, stereotypes, preferences and points of reference the viewers already possess.

To examine whether existing viewer preferences find any reflection in the "menu" of TV programs offered would contribute towards answering the question of the proportion in which television influences or merely reproduces existing social relationships.

Some authors claim that TV content originates entirely from cultural industry that is in position to peddle almost any sort of content to the viewers, insulated from their preferences and tastes (Kellner 2009). At the same time, others (Brennan 2004) note that, contrary to feeling that they are in position to impose their preferences upon unwilling audience, producers of TV content often feel tightly constrained by the preferences of the viewers in what and how they are allowed to speak about. However, even in case of most generous assumptions about the power of preferences of the viewers to influence TV content, the way in which those preferences are factored into the production of the content is highly mediated (Hayward 1993). The viewers are just one, although indispensible, component of the system in which it is determined what appears on TV screen – a system that includes television stations, programming networks, and advertisers (Allen 1992).

In this thesis, I will use an example of the long-running American daytime serial "General Hospital" and a particular group of fans of that show who, being displeased with the

developments “General Hospital” undertook in 2009, launched a campaign called “Save our Soap” in order to influence the direction of that daytime serial in order to examine the ways in which preferences of the viewers of the show are factored into it’s contents. Specifically, I will look into channels through which viewers can make their preferences “count”, and how viewers’ opinions are channeled and mediated before possible incorporation. I will attempt to discern whether the is a difference between the degree to which passive, aggregated and limited expression of viewers’ preferences through ratings and active, less bounded expression of preference articulated through the campaign are reflected in the content of the show. To this end, I will give account of the activity of the “Save our Soap” group, analyze the ways in which they perceive and utilize different forms of communication with the producers of the show, and conduct a content analysis of “General Hospital” episodes of 2009 through 2010 – the timeframe in which the campaign was active – in order to discern to which extent, if any, expressed preferences of the “Save our Soap” group and the ratings were reflected in the show.

I chose a daytime serial, or “soap opera”, for my investigation due to several factors that, in my opinions, make daytime serials an ideal material for studying audience/producer interaction and possible influence of audience over content. “Soap operas” exemplify the traits of commercial mass TV programming which can sometimes be diluted on other genres, namely: mass appeal, as “soap operas” have consistently attracted more viewers in more countries for longer time than any other genre (Allen 1995), despite having lost much of it’s popularity in recent years; explicitly commercial form, as most daytime serials are not concerned with maintaining an appearance of “quality art” independent of commercial pressures; extreme rationalization and standardization of production, as new episodes are created in but a few days. This allows me to treat daytime serials as an “ideal type” of mass commercial television in general.

Additional factors that allow me to treat "soap operas" as a good example of audience/producer interaction are:

Long history of such interaction – producers started to gather information about audience through specific forms of interaction with it as far as in 1930 when daytime serials were broadcasted in radio format (Hayward 1993; Allen 1995; Lavin 1995);

Open-endedness of daytime serial as a work constantly "in progress", which means that the reaction of the viewers can be known to the producers not only "post hoc" when all the decisions have already been made, but rather can be incorporated in the following episodes during the course of the series (Hayward 1993; Scardaville 2005);

The need for high degree of viewer loyalty in order for a given daytime serial to succeed. Viewers need to make a significant cognitive and emotional investment in order to extract pleasure from watching the show and thus join the ranks of reliable audience, as casual first-time viewer not familiar with the intricate histories of "soap opera" characters and plots is unlikely to gain any information that would "hook" her or him into watching from any single episode (Allen 1995; Baym 2000).

Of all the other TV genres, producers of daytime serials most often insist that audience's preferences have a lot of impact upon the storyline (Hayward 1993; Scardaville 2005), or at least like to present it that way to the viewers. While the degree of truth of such statements is debatable, and it is likely that the influence of viewer preferences, when some changes to the storyline are introduced, is overstated (Bielby & Bielby & Harrington, 1995), the precedents that viewers of daytime serials can and do have influence has been established (Levine 2001; Scardaville 2005). Among them are breaking up an unpopular couple (Scodari 1995), reinstating popular actors fired by the network (Hayward 1993; Hayward 1997; Ford 2008), reversing decisions for show's cancellation (Scardaville 2005), influencing whether a given character survives or dies (LaGuardia, 1983, p. 6, in Scardaville 2005), and facilitating inclusion or

exclusion of discussion of controversial issues such as rape, drug addiction and homosexuality (Hayward 1993; Hayward 1997).

All of the above allows me to conclude that daytime serials, and “General Hospital” as an example of daytime serials, are a good angle from which to approach the problem of audience/producer interaction.

An example of “Save our Soap” campaign allows me to isolate a particular active group of viewers who attempt to influence the contents of a TV show. One of the main challenges in study of audiences is that groups of viewers rarely identify themselves as ”the audience”, and so even for the scholars who research audiences, such audiences remain in many ways implied (Hartley 1989; Ang 1994; Gray & Lotz 2012). Focus on a particular active group of viewers allows me to isolate a “nicely bound, self-defined audience community” (Baym 2000, 19) for further research.

In the first chapter of this thesis I will provide a brief overview of literature related to my topic and the ways in which relationship between audience and producers are conceptualized therein. In the second chapter I will in a few words sketch the economic imperatives of TV production and how it influences relation of audience to producer, and describe theoretical frameworks which add clarity to the audience-producer relation by examining how it is mediated by the specific concepts of audience adopted within the industry. In the last chapter I will present the results of my analysis of the case of “General Hospital” and “Save our Soap” group, which indicates that neither direct influence of viewers nor lack of attempts from the industry to take into account such preferences are an adequate way to describe viewer-producer relationship, and instead, the role of particular ways in which audience is conceptualized by the producers is emphasized.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will give a brief overview of the two main approaches to the study of relationship between media content and it's intended audience – political economy and cultural studies - and the ways in which activity of audience is conceptualized within them. I will also outline the strengths and limitations of these two approaches, as well as point out the works integrating them. In the second part of this chapter I will focus on the studies of viewers' interactions with TV producers and inquiries into producers' conceptualization of audience.

1.1 Political economy approach

One of the most prominent ways in which the media industries have been studied is through political economic analysis. The application of political economy analysis to the media can be traced to the work of Frankfurt School founders Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. Critical media studies such as works by Noam Chomsky and Herbert Schiller also contributed significantly to this direction of inquiry (Napoli 2009). Political economy can be broadly described as the "study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (Mosco 1996 in Holt & Perren 2009, 7), and it analyses television primarily as a set of institutions (Casey 2002), and indeed, the very term "culture industry", which is indispensable for any research concerning cultural producers on industry level, is coined within the Frankfurt School. The concept of "culture industry" draws attention to the commercial imperatives of TV system (Holt & Perren 2009), namely, television institutions and practices are thought to adhere to the logic of commodification and capital accumulation (Napoli 2009). It is greatly influenced by Marxist thought, specifically the idea that the mode of production determines, or at least greatly

influences, the structures, practices and power relations within society. Accordingly, this approach situates the media in general and television in particular within the dominant mode of production of a given society.. This type of analysis appears to be full of potential to enable researcher to study the degree of audience's influence over content of TV shows, because more than any other approach it contributes to an understanding of the behavior of media industries and offers to provide an explanation as to why certain type of content instead of other appears on screen (Napoli 2009). However, historically, industry-level analysis as well as research into the process cultural producers' decision-making did not figure audience into its analysis, not in the least due to the original vision of cultural industry constructed by Adorno and Horkheimer which assumed a one-way flow of communication from the industry towards the passive audience, tastes and preferences of which are formed by the industry instead of being taken into account. In the early days of political economy analysis, the content of television program was seen as mere reflection of the ideology and preferences of the ruling economic elite that controls it (Kellner 2009) with their own tastes, instead of those of the audience, finding expression on TV broadcasting. Later development in this direction of analysis mostly dispensed with the idea of the content as a direct expression of the preferences of media elites, and instead concluded that it depends on established corporate interests, patterns of media ownership, market dynamics and regulatory structure (Napoli 2009). Nevertheless audience is conceptualized in this approach mainly in terms of how it is affected by TV.

Market dynamics proved to be an excellent entry point for examining the effects of audience preference in the recent work within the political economy approach. By identifying certain, if limited, extent of viewer satisfaction as a part of economic imperative necessary for the survival of TV network, presence or absence of constraints which the preferences of audience might put on the content of TV programming can finally be made visible within political economy framework. Some of the recent research explores the possibility explaining political

slant of media outlets through understanding of the product preferences of the target consumers of a given outlet (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2006 in Napoli 2009). Others inquire into what kind of audience "counts" for the cultural industry to cater to their desires and preferences of which audience are ignored, due to economic reasons (Meehan 2005). In a similar vein, some research (see Hamilton 1998) uncovers the dependency between preferences of the audience most valued by advertisers and the quantity of violent programming offered by TV networks (Napoli 2009). Political economy approach provided the basis for industry-level analysis of the ways in which preferences of viewers might influence TV programming, however, lack of attention to activity of the viewers been a major weakness of this approach.

1.2 Cultural studies approach

The other major approach to the study of media can be found in the area of scholarship broadly described as cultural studies. Formed in 1970, it draws mainly from British cultural studies, it shifts emphasis from industry-level media production to audience perception and consumption of TV content. An audience's interpretation of TV messages, especially the differences between interpretation of TV signs by particular audience communities and the interpretation "intended" by the producers, is the main area of interest for cultural studies approach. This focus on an audience's readings, especially as far as these readings can be interpreted as resistive and counter-hegemonic, can be seen, at least in part, as a reaction against both a pessimism of the Frankfurt School which implies total power of producer-imposed ideology over audience, and an "economic determinism" of early political economy (Levine 2001).

One of the greatest achievements of this approach is reexamining the concept of a passive audience that would eagerly consume whatever TV networks decide to produce inherited from early political economists. Instead, the concept of "active audience" is championed by such

writers as John Fiske (1987) and Stuart Hall (1980), Encoding/Decoding model of the latter offers one of the bases for the approach. Encoding/Decoding model for a long time been one of the main tools with which scholars in cultural studies articulate the power of cultural industries, seen primarily as the power to impose its own dominant version of the discourse via media products, as a site of struggle between those making texts ("encoding") and those interpreting them ("decoding"). This decoding activity is one of the main audience activities studied under "active audience" rubic (Holt & Perren 2009, Casey et al 2002, Ang 1985); however, other types of audience activity, such as the ways viewers make use of television in their everyday life, as well as community-making activity of audiences, are also studied (Lembo 2000). Focus on audience communities and everyday activities of actual audience members is another valuable insight offered by cultural studies, as opposed to aggregated and somewhat static model of audience used in political economy approach.

Hall's original Encoding/Decoding model did take into account the influence of audience discourse over production, noting that producers themselves draw upon and adapt to audience's own discourse (Hall 1980). Similar notions are expressed by Elliott, who links the idea of society as a source of message to society as an audience (Eliott 1972, in Morley 1982). However, historically, in the field of cultural studies less attention was paid to the cultural production, and thus any possible influence audience might have had over it (Levine 2001). This "blind spot" of cultural studies towards cultural production is not unnoticed by scholars within the discipline. Indeed, it has become rather common to claim that cultural studies place too much emphasis on the textual analysis and audience perception while nearly ignoring the economic factors that determine what appears on screen in the first place (Kellner 2009).

Accordingly, audience activity studied under the cultural studies framework is usually limited to that related to reception. Nevertheless, many studies of audience communities contain observations of audience members' attempts to interact with the producers, even if such

activities are not the focus of the studies in question (Bielby et al.1999; Baym 2000; Ford 2008). Economic significance of audience preferences for the possibility of cultural production is also occasionally alluded to, even if not examined in detail. Fiske (1989), for one, draws explicit attention to the "discriminatory" nature of audiences, meaning that viewers are perfectly capable of not only interpreting what they see on TV in different ways, but on deciding what to watch and whether to watch anything at all, even as he continues to focus on the interpretation. He describes the ability of audience to discriminate as perhaps the greatest vulnerability of cultural industries, the very existence of which depends "upon their ability to meet these tastes, to survive this discrimination"(Fiske 1989, 35).

Although recent studies increasingly dispense with the notion that there is inherent incompatibility between political economy and cultural studies, and the works combining both approaches increasingly proliferate, this convergence often leaves the question of how audience factors in production unexamined. Studies that examine both production and reception are not infrequent, however, for many of them the association of audience exclusively with reception persists. One of the models that does not confine audience strictly to activities of interpretation is R. Johnson's (1987) "circuit of culture", which not only insists on looking at both production, texts, audiences and socioeconomic contexts but, more importantly, draws attention to the "productive" elements in cultural consumption, that is, the way in which consumption patterns influence what would eventually be produced (Levine 2001, pp. 57-58).

Nevertheless, both within an industry-centered political economy approach and audience activity centered cultural studies, there emerged some directions of research dealing more directly with the interrelation between viewers and industries. One such direction within the political economy approach can be characterized as an inquiry into the ways in which audience preferences affect the industries economically and in the ways in which the needs of industries lead them to conceive, and act upon, a particular vision of their audience. Within the cultural

studies approach, one promising direction of inquiry is the study of audience activity towards the producers. Another direction, studies in which are infrequent due to difficulty of access but often prove illuminating, is ethnographic accounts on the decision-making process of those working in TV industry.

1.3 Fan studies

Among the research of audience activity as related to deliberate attempts of the viewers to interact with producers in order to affect what appears on screen, studies of fans hold prominent place. Research on fan communities expands the notion of audience activity. While numerous studies of fan communities, such as those of H. Jenkins, focused primarily on their function as "institutions of interpretation" (Baym 2000, 16), in continuation with the traditions of the more general area of audience research enshrined in cultural studies approach, they improve upon previous audience research in the following ways: expanding the range of activities studied, which allows for inclusion of the interaction with the producers, situating viewers activity more explicitly within the television production industry; and by including other media, such as magazines and electronic communication, and the way it shapes and channels relationship between consumers and producers of television, into the analysis (Bielby et al. 1999). Those studies rarely focus explicitly upon the relations between fans and the industry; however, even though the studies the main focus of which is community building (Baym 2000), reinterpretation and derivative creativity (Jenkins 1994; Grey 2012), politics of fandom (Scodari 1998), claims of expertise concerning the show's narrative (Bielby et al. 1999) or opportunities opened by electronic means of communication (Bielby et al. 1999; Baym 2000; Ford 2008) usually include extensive details about fan letters, fan clubs contact with the network, and similar details about interaction with the producers. Interestingly, it also includes accounts of fans' own

conception of their role as cultural consumers in relation to producers – accounts which are present, but rarely given explicit attention.

One of the few authors to explicitly call attention to the ways in which those working in the cultural industry interact with their audience, and the degree to which it influences the finished product is Jennifer Hayward, who finds that viewers are very active in their attempts to make the networks aware of their preferences, and that producers of the content respond to the desires of the audience, if only in some heavily mediated and limited ways (Hayward 1993). Bielby contributes to the study of audience-producer interaction by examining how this interaction is shaped by different media through which it is carried out, and how different channels of communication differ in what kind of feedback they allow through and how much legitimacy different channels lend to the fan opinion in the eyes of those working within the industry (Bielby et al. 1999).

The topic of deliberate fan campaigns to introduce particular changes in television show or keep a program on air is extensively referred to (Hayward 1993; Gitlin 1983; Baym 2000), but the literature covering it explicitly is scarce. Much more information is available about the attempts of pressure groups to influence TV content (see for example Montgomery 1990), but to what extent they can be considered viewers is debatable, since many of those involved in the pressure groups do not actually consume the media product they engage with. Scardaville's account of "activist" fans and motivations, methods and results of their campaign to keep the show they like on air is one such rare example (Scardaville 2005). One of the findings of interest in that study is the idea that the likelihood of viewers to deliberately engage with the industry in order to effect changes in content, as opposed to simply switching channel or turning TV set off, is related to the tendency of certain TV genres, such as daytime series, to serve as a focus for fan community building. Although there are significant differences between fans and average viewers (see Bielby et al. 1999), which means that the accounts of fan behavior can be

extrapolated upon the majority of viewers only with great caution, such accounts still provide valuable insight into the relationship between viewers and producers of TV content.

1.4 Industry's conceptions of audience and it's influence over content

As opposed to those who study viewers' activity, scholars approaching the viewer-industry relationship from the industry end took notice not as much of the "actual" activity of "actual" audience (however problematic this notion might be), but rather on the way those in the business of television get knowledge about the audience conceptualized in the way that is useful for them, and how the result of their specific processes of knowledge-making factors into their decisions about programming. This difference between the point of view of "actual" audience and institutional conception thereof is pointed out by several scholars (Ang 1994). Rosten (1941) and Powdermaker's (1950) studies of Hollywood film, in which they employed interviews and participant observation in order to discern the ways in which audiences are conceptualized by both executives and writers, are one example of such direction of the research (Holt & Perren 2009). This ethnographic account is complemented by macro-level analysis by Paul DiMaggio and Paul Hirsch, who draw attention to the conceptualizing of audience as a tool for industry to manage the issues of uncertainty (ibid)

Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* (1983), with its step-by-step account of how decisions about which TV show to keep on air are made, can probably be considered a seminal work for that type of research. In this work, which reaffirms that successes and failures of television industry depend heavily on the viewers' taste, the notion of uncertainty receives close examination. He notes that inherent unpredictability of audience is in contradiction with the TV network executives' desire for rationality, calculability and minimization of risk, and describes the attempts to minimize uncertainty by creating controllable, reliable means of knowing the audience – through tests, ratings, focus groups – in order to "predict the unpredictable" (Gitlin

1983, 32). Resulting aggregated knowledge cannot be deployed immediately, since the same set of numbers can be used to support contradictory courses of action, so in the end executives are forced to employ their own judgment about what the viewers would like so see. Such judgment often proves to be incorrect, not in the least because of the difference between the cultural capital of the members of broadcasting elite and their target audience – a point also made by Zafirau (2009) also makes in his ethnographic account of everyday life of Hollywood cultural producers. Inability to use their own tastes to predict success or failure with a sufficient degree of reliability contributes to the need for operationalization of decision-making. Gitlin also observes that mismatch between such "operation" knowledge about the audience and it's "actual" preferences (which can only be known post-factum) is well-known to those working in the industry, however, it does not make their preferred modes of gaining knowledge obsolete, since their main use is to justify decision-making as "rational" .

John Hartley's "Invisible Fictions" idea explores the various ways in which audiences as a subject of analysis are constructed, and, furthermore, what roles these constructions serve as rhetoric devices and modes of justification for those who claim to speak "for" the audience. He proposes that audiences, as well as their preferences, are what he calls "invisible fictions" which are "produced institutionally in order for various institutions to take charge of the mechanisms of their own survival" (Hartley 1989, 227). The way in which the images of audiences are produced always serves the needs of the producing institution.

Both Gitlin and Hartley suggest that decisions in cultural industry are made, at least in part, on the basis of what audience is thought to be, and the point can be made that both a) audiences are imagined in accordance with economic and administrative needs of television industries and b) the conceptions of audience under which television industry operates are not completely voluntary and are determined both by industrial necessity (which determines what kind of knowledge of audience should be gained) and actual properties of the people

conceptualized as audience (which determines the result of the attempt to gain specific knowledge). In other words, under the framework of "invisible fiction", television executives make decisions about the content of programming based on their ideas about specific categories of valued audience wants – which might or might not match what the actual viewers in the target group, not to mention the rest of the viewers want, but it also does not match what those working within TV industry would prefer them to want. Authors such as Eileen Meehan enhance the ethnographic account of producers' decision making with political economic analysis of how imperatives of profit and reliance for profit on advertising determines which viewers, along with their hypothetical preferences, are considered valuable by the industry (Meehan 2005).

Another author to include concern for audience preferences and the methods by which they are accessed by the industry is Elana Levine (2001), who draws a detailed account of the production process of General Hospital – an account to which I will return several times throughout this work. She draws upon Richard Johnson's circuit of culture model in order to account for relation between texts, audiences and social contexts during the course of production of one particular daytime serial. In her essay she notes that the audience, both in the conception of it by the industry and in actual activity of it's members, is "lurking throughout all aspects of production" (Levine 2001, 78). She also describes the usual procedures of seeking and handling audience feedback employed by the production team of General Hospital, which again highlights the ways in which knowledge of audience preferences is both sought and constrained.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the beginning of this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the place preferences of viewers hold in economic activity of the producers of TV programs and to which extent achievement of their goals depends on satisfying viewers' demands. Later I will describe several theories outlining the discontinuity between producers' goals and knowledge about audience's preferences necessary to reach them, and pointing out how network's goals and practices shape the ways in which audiences are conceptualized, knowledge about audience's preferences is gained, and the ways in which such knowledge is incorporated into production process.

2.1 Economic imperatives and role of audience

Most authors are in consensus that the function of TV content to the program for commercial broadcaster is very different from it's function to viewer: the aim of broadcasting is not to entertain, enlighten or provide a public service (Allen 1992), nor do they particularly care about meaning, significance and rituals surrounding television in the daily lives of viewers (Bielby et al. 1999). Their aim is to make profit. Due to specific traits of TV programs as commodities – namely, that they can be classified as "public goods" (Napoli 2009), which is, from an economic standpoint, the type of product that is not used up in the process of consumption and thus can be consumed by unlimited number of people unlimited number of times without creating additional "units" of product, and due to difficulty of identifying consumers and compelling them to pay for such product (ibid), direct "selling" of TV programs to viewers as consumers could never become a source of profit for broadcasting industry. Instead, broadcasters make money by cultivating and selling a different commodity to advertisers – commodity being the audience (Gitlin 1983; Allen 1992; Morley 1992; Meehan 2005; Napoli 2009).

TV programming is the hook to attract the audience which advertisers desire and are willing to pay for (Allen 1992). In order to deliver required audience, programming has to be at least somewhat satisfactory for the viewers. As Hayward (1993) neatly sums it, **"**To produce a profitable show, networks must increase advertising revenues; increasing revenues requires keeping ratings up; high ratings imply satisfied viewers; viewer satisfaction demands a compelling show, which means networks must keep close tabs on what viewers consider compelling" (Hayward 1993, 101).

Conceptualization of audience as a commodity that is produced in response to advertisers' demands significantly limits which parts of audience networks strive to keep satisfied. First of all, "target" audience is bounded demographically to match the profile of advertisers' desired customer. Daytime serials are typically sponsored by producers of household, health and beauty products, and thus the target audience for daytime serials are women between the ages of 18 and 49 (Intintoli 1984, p.63, quoted in Scodari 1998). As number of viewers, as opposed to viewer investment and degree of interest, is what advertisers require, In order to extend the size of audience and thus potential revenues from advertisers, the show has to appeal to a "marginal" and not particularly invested viewer rather than loyal fan (Bielby et al. 1999). In addition, there is an eternal search for "younger" demographics – the previous viewerbase ages and much constantly be replaced. (ibid).This, however, poses a contradiction to the specifics of daytime serials as lasting for decades and taking a long time to build viewer loyalty necessary to garner high ratings reliably and predictably – a contradiction that adds additional level to the question about preferences of which viewers producers of daytime serials attempt to take into account.

Operating by the logic of business enterprise, networks strive to, first and foremost, optimize efficiency and minimize risk (Schatz 2009). The pressure to maximize efficiency is even more prevalent in the production of daytime serials, due to the incredibly fast rate of

production of the new episodes, during which the conflicts between the producers about the direction of the show have to be resolved as quickly as possible, which makes soap operas an "efficient, calculable and highly controlled genre" (Brennan 2004). In order to minimize the chances of failure and optimize the production process, information about preferences of the viewers in the target demographic is extensively sought, and collected in such as way as to be seamlessly integrated in the production process and optimize it further (ibid).

In the following parts of this chapter, I will present several theories describing how the goal of making profit and of maximizing efficiency are reflected in the ways in which network executives conceive an audience and it's preferences.

2.2 Market information regime

As numerous authors concur (Gitlin 1983; Webscter & Phalen & Lichty 2000; Doyle 2002; Meehan 2005; Jamieson & Campbell 2001; Napoli 2009), from the point of view of network both the success of the show and preferences of it's hypothetical audience are defined mainly in terms of Nielsen ratings – the currently main system of audience measurement. This system of measurements uses information about viewing habits gathered from a sample of households and utilizes statistical methods to extrapolate the results upon the total viewing population. The tools for gathering information include viewer diaries, in which the people in the households belonging to the sample self-report which programs they watched, and electronic measurement devices which register at which time a given TV set was turned on. The numbers gathered that way are converted into ratings – a single rating point represents approximately 1 percent of total households with TV set in America.

These ratings, often demarcated along demographic lines, are the main mechanism by which audience is commodified and used in economic exchanges with advertisers (Hartley 1989;

Morley 1992), and preferences of audience are only taken into account in as far as they influence ratings and are reflected in them. The idea of market information regime, offered by Anand and Peterson (2000) allows to describe the mostly self-perpetuating mechanism by which the ratings come to such importance, as well as their role in the optimization of the production process, desirability of which for the network I have outlined above.

According to Anand and Peterson, market information regime is the medium through which producers observe each other and market participants make sense of their world. Market information regime is developed and comes into prominence when several profit-seeking organizations within the same general field – be they competitors or partners –develop the same, mutually utilized set of information upon which to base decisions. As market in itself is an abstract entity which is not "out there" for participants to observe, but rather can only be experienced by participation, for which some sort of reliable information is already needed, cognition of "the market" usually occurs through such information regime, that is, on agreed upon and taken for granted notions about what constitutes "the market" and what sort of information is necessary to understand it sufficiently well to operate. This regime is constituted through regularly updated information sought to be relevant to the market activity provided by independent supplier. Such set of information has to available to all interested parties, and convey the impression that this particular type of information is valid and vitally important (Anand & Peterson 2000). In order to effectively serve as tool for common understanding between different interested sides, market information regime needs to be perceived as neutral and objective – that latter claim often enhanced by appeal to "scientific" data, rationalization, and numbers that "speak for themselves". In the case of ratings, Nielsen can be seen as such independent supplier of information upon which the attention of both broadcasters and advertisers is focused. It is interesting to note that, while Nielsen measurements project the air of objectivity, their actual flaws are well-known within the industry (Gitlin 1982), and the main

reason for use of them is not in their accuracy in the degree to which their meaure viewers' satisfaction – or even the simple number of viewers - but in the degree to which institutional practices are already constructed around it (Vogel 1998, quoted in Anand & Peterson 2000). The strength of ratings for the industry lies in the ease with which low-level employees can use them in order to buy and sell advertising time "by the book" and "according to numbers", this streamlining the process and allowing to increase efficiency (Meehan 2005; Meyers 2009). Once the particular market information regime is established around a particular data set, exactly to what it corresponds in reality becomes less relevant, as it in itself becomes an object around which market decisions are made. Ratings are the "yardstick by which television time is sold" (Allen 1992, 19), which means that if by some fluke of chance the program gathered high ratings but in "reality" no one watched, it would be quite fine, because the ratings themselves are basis for negotiation (Allen 1992; Casey 2002; Meehan 2005), as commodity audience (as opposed to viewers, who are flesh and blood people who do exist), for which ratings stand, does not really exist in any other tangible or verifiable form (Napoli 2009).

2.3 Structural uncertainty and the problem of knowledge

Even with ratings as the sole measure of the show's success, it still remains to be noted that there is no sure risk-free way by which the producers might know in advance which show will gain high ratings. As operationalized and dependable ratings might be, fickle preferences of the viewers still figure into them somehow. These preferences are, according to some authors, fundamentally unknowable to the producers due to sheer size of mass audience (Gitlin 1982). Minimization of risk and maximization of efficiency needed for profitable business and eventual dependence upon an unknowable factor creates what Gitlin (1982) and Hartley (1989) see as a problem of structural uncertainty.

> "The networks place a premium on rationality, searching for seemingly systematic, impersonal, reliable ways to predict success and failure. Like any industry that seeks to tap and shape the vagaries of public taste and tolerance, to mitigate uncertainty they institutionalize their quest" (Gitlin 1983, 31)

This paradox – need for rationality and efficiency when dealing with the phenomenon notoriously difficult to predict – might be linked to the adoption of market information regimes described above, as producers attempt to construct an account of their world that makes sense and, more importantly, can be used as a basis for agentive action (Fligstein 1996, quoted in Anand & Peterson 2000). Importance of audience preferences acknowledged, those preferences unknowable, the industry attempts to overcome the problem of structural uncertainty by creating what Hartley describes as an "invisible fiction" – an institutionalized plausible account of audience that can be used as a basis and justification for network's decisions. As decision-making within production process is far from monolithic and in itself involves negotiation between different actors involved in production, that "invisible fiction" of an audience too has to be imbued with the appearance of impersonal, objective, reliable and scientific data independent of human factor in order to serve as a tool for arbitration of conflicts to which everyone would agree.

A brief outline of the economic imperatives under which commercial broadcasting operates given at the beginning of this chapter leads me to suppose that preferences of the viewers would play significant, if heavily mediated, role in determining what sort of content appears on TV screen. In as far as airing of program is only justified by it's ability to attract a large audience, which is necessary in order to gain revenue from advertisers, some authors expect it to conform more or less closely to the simple logic of supply and demand (Brennan 2004), if modified by relationship with advertiser in that advertisers demand a particular

audience and it is the preferences of that audience, instead of viewership total, which are factored into the content (Meehan 2005). However, this simplistic expectation is complicated by the problem of structural uncertainty inherent to the industries in which success to a certain degree depends on audience's preferences. It is plausible to suppose that the specific ways in which audiences are conceptualized and knowledge of their preference gained – ways informed by the pressures towards rationalization and efficiency, and the possibility of using such knowledge as an impersonal argument in solving production-related conflicts – would have at least as much influence over the content of TV show as expressed preferences of audience. Specifically, the central role of the ratings pointed out both through economical analysis and through the prism of sense-making activity leads me to suppose that fluctuations in ratings would have decisive role in influencing the direction of "General Hospital".

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

The cause upon which this thesis focuses is that of an American daytime television drama “General Hospital” and the fan-organized campaign named “Save our Soap”.

Launched in 1963, “General Hospital” is the longest-running American soap opera currently in production. “General Hospital” spawned numerous imitations and similar products across the world, and so can be seen as a good representative of daytime TV series.

Initially focused on the eponymous General Hospital in a then-unnamed fictional city (the city only received it's name, Port Charles, in late 1970s) and on the interpersonal relationships of doctors and nurses working there, it eventually shifted focus to the other inhabitants of the city, with it's rivaling criminal organizations taking prominent place.

It is broadcast and produced by the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), in the format of 60-minute episode every weekday.

Once (from 1979 to 1988) a highest-rated American daytime serial, it's popularity as measured by ratings steadily declined both in absolute numbers (from 11.4 yearly average at the peak of popularity to 2.1 in 2008/2009 season) and in relative positions (from №1 American “soap opera” to consistently remaining at about 4-th place).

A campaign named “Save out Soap” has been launched by the a group fans of the serial in 2009 in order to express their dissatisfaction with then-current direction of the show and, more importantly, to promote changes that they believed would positively affect the show's popularity. As the positions of “General Hospital” declined, and another long-running American daytime serial, “Guiding Light”, which is credited as the longest-running program ever broadcast, being on the air for full 72 years (if the radio serial from which it originated is included), was canceled due to low ratings in 2009, the group of viewers who later initiated the “Save our Soap” campaign became worried about the possibility of “General Hospital” also being canceled.

This group consisted of self-identified fans of not only “General Hospital” in general but particular character couples - Sonny and Kate, Jason and Elizabeth, Patrick and Robin, and Jax and Carly – in particular, who initially congregated on the particular Internet message boards dedicated to the characters, such as “The Heart & the Hope” for Sonny and Kate, “The Liason Haven” (http://z11.invisionfree.com/the_liason_haven/index.php) for Jason and Elizabeth, “Megan Haven” (http://www.meganhaven.com.) for Kate and the actress playing her Megan Ward, with the main site for the campaign maintained and press releases written by Dana L. Meyer and Kecia K. Picard. It's Facebook page has about 1600 members, which is not a significant size for a fangroup, but nonetheless respectable. According to the press-releases, the goal of the campaign was to “work with ABC/Disney to win back viewers and restore GH to the position it once held”. Specifically, it attempted to articulate what was for this group of viewers the most common sources of displeasure with the then-current direction of “General Hospital” included, though were not limited to: characters with a long-standing presence in the show written in a way inconsistent with their previously established history and personality, established characters being overshadowed by the newly-included ones, excessive quantity of “immoral” behavior on the screen, lack of enduring romantic relationships, excessive focus on the “mob” storylines as opposed to “hospital” ones, and generally bland and boring writing. To this end it utilized several methods, which will be described in further detail later, of contacting the network executives with the information of their preferences and suggested changes.

The group and campaign were active since June 2009 and lasted for approximately a year, till July 2010. There never been any “official” ending date, however, I have chosen to indicate this time as the time of effective end of the campaign, as little to no activity related to it can be observed on a latter date.

4. METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the "Save our Soap" campaign as a case of producer/audience interaction, I have decided to focus on the two aspects of such interaction: its results and the way in which it was conducted.

To examine the former, I have conducted quantitative content-analysis (Neuendorf 2002) of a number of General Hospital episodes from the beginning of 2009 to the end of 2010, which covers a time period of several months before the "Save our Soap" campaign started – June 2009 – to the time when it effectively ended – approximately July 2010 – and several months after that time.

The particular suggestions about the direction of the "General Hospital" offered by the "Save our Soap" group are the following "Ten Remedies":

1. Character-driven Storylines
2. Character Growth & Development
3. Historical Continuity
4. Respect for Veteran Characters
5. Emotional Balance for Characters & Storylines
6. Increased Focus on Families
7. Enduring Couples
8. Less Sleaze
9. More Romance & Humor
10. Overall Enjoyable Escape

Assessing the degree to which these particular suggestions are implemented into the "General Hospital" narrative proved to be quite problematic, for the following reasons: first, it would require detailed knowledge of the "General Hospital" history and previous storylines and characterization that lies way outside of the scope of my current research and, second, because it would require me to make too many subjective judgments about whether any featured scene in particular contains such features as "character development" or "emotional balance" – judgments which, even were I qualified to make them, would not necessary match those that "Save our Soap" members would have made. In addition, the sheer amount of material for analysis, which consisted of over 400 hour-long episodes and totaled to no less 266 hours of screentime even when

advertising, which takes up a considerable amount of an hour allocated to an episode, is left out, made me resort to computer-assisted coding in order to make it manageable, so I've decided to find another indicator that would reflect the preferences of the "Save our Soap" group and at the same time be possible to utilize automatically. I have chosen the number of character appearances - for the purposes of my research, one character appearance is a presence (indicated by spoken line) of the character in a given scene – as such indicator, due to following reasons:

While no suggestions concerning particular characters were featured in the "ten remedies" list, suggestions about particular characters and opinions on whether their presence positively or negatively impacts the show were ubiquitous throughout "Save our Soap" press-releases.

Presence of certain characters was often described as associated with the suggestions mentioned above, such as, for example, when the character of Claudia was discussed, her storylines were strongly associated with "sleaze" and thus considered undesirable, along with the character.

In order for such suggestions as "Respect for veteran characters" or "Enduring couples" to be realized, characters identified as "veteran characters" or members of couple Save our Soap wants to endure have to be present on screen in the first place. While their mere presence would not necessary indicate that "Save our Soap" group's suggestions were followed, their absence would surely indicate that they were not.

The episodes were coded using full and detailed transcript available at http://tvmegasite.net/day/gh/transcripts.shtml. Before settling on that particular transcript, I have watched 20 episodes of General Hospital at random, comparing them to the transcript I had at hand, in order to make sure that the transcript I am using does not contain inaccuracies, and to establish the relation of the transcript to the television picture. I've found no inaccuracies, however, I did find out that some of the information available via television image is not contained within the transcript. The transcript contains only lines spoken by the characters as well as accompanying sounds, and is devoid of visual information as well as description. The transcript does not contain

any information about the characters' relative position, actions or interaction aside of purely audible, nor does it contain the description of the location or even indication of the location. Considering the indicator I have chosen, however – the number of characters' appearances per episode – those limitations of transcript posed no obstacle for this particular research.

While some "soap operas" follow rigid structure in which each episode has a set number of scenes of fixed length (Brennan 2004), "General Hospital" does not follow this pattern and shows considerable variety in both the number of separate scenes within the episode and the length of the scene. Because of that, analysis of simple number of scenes featuring given character would have been misleading, and accordingly, I've decided to focus on proportion of one set of characters relative to others instead of absolute numbers. Several episodes were not available in transcribed form, so I have excluded the weeks that had one or more "missing" episodes from the analysis.

In order to take an account the way in which the interaction between the producers of "General Hospital" and "Save our Soap" members occurred, I have examined the group's website at http://www.saveoursoapgh.com/ and message board at http://z10.invisionfree.com/saveoursoapsabc/index.php?act=idx , with the special attention focused on the press-releases produced by the group. There were 26 press-releases in total, with the first issued 04.06.09 and the last 11.06.10. Of that number 22 were issued in 2009 and 4 in 2010. I have analyzed these press-releases in the following ways: as a source of data about the group's preferences to use in content analysis described above; as a source documenting the group's activities; and, finally, as a message intended to persuade. In this last aspect of analysis I have identified the recurring topics, themes and rhetoric devices utilized by the group.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 Influence of campaign and ratings

In order to find out whether the activity of Save our Soap group had any influence on the direction TV daytime serial General Hospital takes, I have chosen one of the more frequently expressed proposals of this group – to put more focus on a certain set of characters and less focus on the other set – and checked if the number of appearances (by week) of the "preferred" and "disliked" (by that group) set of characters changed after the group started it's activity. My first hypothesis, based on the precedents of successful attempts by viewers to change the direction of TV program described briefly in the introduction, was that the number of appearances of the "liked" set would increase, which would show that this group was able to influence the content of the serial.

To test my second hypothesis concerning the decisive role ratings play in the show's producers' decisions, I have analyzed in the number of appearances of characters associated with higher ratings would increase during the course of the series, and the number of appearances of characters associated with the lower ratings, conversely, decrease.

However, analysis shown that neither of these hypotheses appears to be supported by data.

The number of appearances of characters favored by "Save our Soap" group has been persistently decreasing, while the number of appearances of the characters disliked by that group has been increasing, throughout the time range covered by my research. No significant changes in the trend after "Save our Soap" group started it's activity are visible (Table 1).

This lack of change in the trend indicates that the impact of Save our Soap group upon the contents of the show has been minimal if any. Such low rate of success is not actually unusual for Internet-based soap opera activism (Scardaville 2005) and does not invalidate the precedents of fan activism changing the course of TV show described briefly in the introduction of this essay, however, it still helps to clarify the degree of the influence such campaigns could potentially have

and avoid overestimating the probability of their success. In addition, as Scardaville (ibid) notices in her account of soap opera fan activism in the case of Another World, offline action is crucial such campaigns in order to avoid being dismissed as merely an insignificant Internet activity. That observations allow me to suggest that insufficient offline presence was one of the factors contributing to the campaign not having any significant impact.

It should be noted that, in the eyes of the Save our Soap group itself, while the results of the campaign as a whole were unsatisfactory, certain moves towards the fan-preferred direction were still reported, such as more focus on the eponymous hospital, emergence of one popular couple and somewhat more orderly romantic relationships of the male lead, none of which can be assessed through the methods of analysis I have chosen. Nevertheless, such result, even though contrary to my initial hypothesis, was well in line with expectations.

Analysis of the possible correlation between the number of character's appearances and their association with higher or lower ratings indicated none-to-negative correlation, as can be seen below:

	Preferred set	Disliked set
Average per week	70.65%	29.35%
Average her high-rated week	76.77%	23.48%
Average per low-rated week	63.60%	36.40%

Emphasis was consistently shifted on certain set of characters despite their association with lower ratings. This shift of focus was reflected both in week-by-week analysis and in the overall direction of the show, which consistently expanded the focus on the characters not popular with the Save our Soap group and consistently retained low ratings. This result might suggest that, contrary to the hypothesis, ratings did not play the decisive role in determining the content of the show. However, since the accounts of network executives basing their decisions about the content of the show on ratings and of ratings being the goal and exchange value of commercial TV programming

in general (Gitlin 1983; Allen 1992; Anand & Peterson 2000; Meehan 2005; Napoli 2009) are numerous and well-documented, I think it is more fruitful to approach the explanation of this apparent lack of dependency between ratings and content from the point of view of the structural uncertainty outlined in the theory chapter and examine the inconsistency between network's desire to create content that would correlate with high ratings and knowledge necessary for the ability to do so. Ratings by themselves are not, and are not designed to be, a finely-tuned tool for determining what changes are needed – a flaw of which producers are quite well aware (Gitlin 1983; Anand & Peterson 2000; Zafirau 2009). It is used to ascertain whether the show should be cancelled, continued as is or changed, but cannot in itself say to producers what kind of change is needed. Other ways of gaining information were employed to that end, with various degree of success – "success" here meaning growth of the ratings.

This problem of knowledge can also be tackled from the fan group's end, as Save our Soap's press releases and message boards, though initially only relevant to my research as a source of data about the group's preferences and peripheral in most other aspects, turned out to contain much valuable information about incongruence of the knowledge about audience preferences generated by the network and viewers' own concept of the same.

To start examining this question, I will give an account of the channels of communication through which Save our Soap members attempted to make their preferences known and the channels by which General Hospital producers attempted to get the type of knowledge about audience preferences they can work with.

5.2 Channels of communication by degree of manageability

Different channels of communication used by viewers differ both in the degree to which they are manageable – that is, reduced to an operationalized form – by the network, and in the

degree to which the feedback received through them is perceived as a legitimate source of data for decision-making by the producers (Bielby et al. 1999). This degree of manageability can be used to broadly separate various available channels into strictly-manageable, loosely manageable and borderline. Polls of official sites of the network, the show or network-affiliated magazine, filling out ABC comment forms, participation in focus groups, phone surveys, episode testing groups – all of which are known to be employed by ABC (Levine 2001) - are strictly-manageable, that is, the questions and topics for possible assessment of opinion are formulated by the network, which also controls the timing of the contact. They are used by the network to deliberately gather a specific type of feedback.

On the other hand, letters to executives and to the show, direct phone calls, sending post cards, petitions and other similar types of feedback can be considered loosely-manageable in that they are not solicited by the network and the network places no restrictions on the initial form and content of the message. There often exists an established and routinized way of dealing with such feedback on the organizational level. Levine (2001) gives account of the way in which viewers' mail is routinely handled by the production team of "General Hospital" as follows: Mail itself is read and sorted by writers' assistants and student interns, who classify the mail, summarize the contents and write appropriate reports. Actual mail rarely reaches anyone higher in the production chain, although reports do, and those reports often include selective quotations from the mail in order to illustrate the summarized contents. Mail is categorized into "positive" and "negative", with "negative" mail being only the letters in which viewers say that they will stop watching.

But even with such efficient and operationalized system in place to deal with such type of feedback, on the sender's end this feedback is still not restricted and, on the receiver end, not sought, and in some case actually considered undesirable if inevitable nuisance (Bielby et al. 1999).

Utilizing official comment phone lines provided by ABC, as well as participation in the discussion on the ABC-affiliated message boards, are borderline cases, that is to say, they are the

channels network provides and controls but rarely (in case of message boards) or never (in case of phone lines) initiates contact with the viewers or formulates it's own questions through them. Viewers are free to define the topic and the timing of the contact, but the way through which it is delivered is moderated by the network.

As Bielby (1999) argues, potential for empowerment of the viewers and the degree to which the channel is managed by the network are inversely proportional, which would suggest that the group determined to make themselves heard by the network would make use of loosely-manageable channels more than of strictly-manageable ones, however, as can be seen below, that did not turned out to be the case.

Methods of contact employed by Save our Soap group included writing emails and letters directed to both the press that covers daytime serials and to the ABC/Disney executives personally, calling by phone on ABC comment lines and General Hospital comment lines, filling out ABC comment forms, sending postcards and petitions, vote in polls on *ABC Soaps in Depth* and on ABC site, participation in discussions on various message boards – both independent and ABC-affiliated, that is, no rejection of network-initiated channels of contact occurred. Although most of the activity specific to the fan campaign, as opposed to more usual course of fan activity (Scardaville 2005) utilized loosely-manageable channels of communication – sending postcards, petitions, press-releases – strictly-manageable channels still held significant role in the campaign and were assigned a lot of importance by the members of Save our Soap group, as will be described in the latter parts of this chapter.

Not much activity was conducted offline – an instance when Save our Soap group sent about 12000 postcards insisting on their preferred direction of change to ABC/Disney executives was one of the few exceptions.

As been noted above, while strictly-manageable channels were not abandoned by Save our Soap group, channels specific to fan activism as opposed to other fan activity tend to be loosely manageable. Meanwhile, as the authors examined in the theoretical part of this essay (Gitlin 1983; Hartley 1989; Anand & Peterson 2000) suggested, those in charge of the production of the show prefer to rely on an information that can be managed strictly and provides a good tool for justification of their decisions and arbitrating conflicts within production team itself by appearing objective, quantifiable, and upon which the information regime is already focused. Below I'll give an account of once channel of feedback from viewers to ABC network undergoing transformation from relatively loosely manageable to strictly manageable and accompanying rise of the perceived importance afforded to information gathered through that channel.

5.3 Case at point – ABC Insider Access

ABC Insider Access - an ABC/Disney affiliated message board which was frequently alluded to throughout this chapter and in press-releases by Save our Soap group - used to be in the middle of loosely-manageable/strictly manageable continuum I have outlined near the beginning of this chapter. It's content was almost entirely loosely manageable– that is, viewers created the new discussion topics and gave a free-form answers with little to no prompting by the network, however, it was maintained by ABC and, most importantly, it was claimed that the transcripts of viewer discussions occurring on that message board are sent to the ABC research department. However, that message board was closed at December 23, 2009, with a telling message by ABC that the "phase of research for which it was used was coming to an end". Instead, a new version of ABC Insider Access message board was created. This new ABC Insider Access board had much more strict procedure to gain membership, and access to it was severely restricted. The new message board is closed to the unregistered viewers, so I was not able to analyze it's contents,

however, though research on the other open online message boards related to General Hospital and other ABC soap operas I have been able to learn some of the criteria for the access. These criteria included age, sex, location and income level, among others. Exact quota is unknown for me, however, there is strong evidence that it existed, because several people reported being repeatedly denied membership and finally successfully getting access after providing falsified data on one or more requirements. In addition, some of the rejected applicants reported receiving the following message:

> "At this time, we are seeking people with a different criteria match for this community. However, we look forward to hearing your feedback in many of our other spaces, including our many fan sites, message boards and forums. We look forward to seeing you online. Thanks again for your interest!"[1]

Which strongly states the existence of quota.

This newly-restricted message board enjoyed unprecedented level of direct attention from the producers. It has been explicitly said by the members of the new ABC Insider moderation team that this forum was designed in order to get immediate feedback from viewers. Indeed, the introductory message to the newly-accepted members of the board read like this:

> "Thanks for joining ABC Insider Access. As a member of this exclusive group, you will have behind-the-scenes access to the people calling the shots. Most importantly, your input will give you the opportunity to help shape your favorite shows, so your participation is critical." [2]

[1] http://greatmindsthinklikemerainlillie.blogspot.hu/2009/02/abc-and-view-are-looking-for-few-dumb.html
[2] Ibid.,

Direct interaction between producing team and the viewers is reported as well. To which extent such reports reflects the actual attitude of production team is up to debate, as some scholars point out that TV producers often claim to follow their audience's concerns even if their actual interest to fan opinions is negligible (Hayward 1993; Scardaville 2005), however, the very fact that such claims were made suggests that ABC Insider message board was indeed one of the privileged sources of information about audience's preferences for the producers.

This information, gathered in accordance with strict quotas from a very restricted and tightly managed group of viewers comes closer to that gained from focus groups and in-house tests of episodes than to the usual less structured feedback allowed by message boards.

Save our Soap group created it's own message board - SOS/Save our Soaps! ABC message board - as a reaction to the changes on ABC Insider. Save our Soap group intended to use this message board as a "sounding board", in order to gather an episode-by-episode feedback from viewers and send it directly to the network executives and writers in charge of the show. That board was active from 23 December 2009 (first post in the last post in General Hospital Daily Storyline Feedback section) to 9 May 2010 (last post in General Hospital Daily Storyline Feedback section) and contained approximately 150 messages, which makes it a little-known and short-lived initiative. However, the attempt to establish such "mirror" board underlines the perceived importance of the official ABC Insider message board as a channel for feedback that might actually be heard. It's short life might also suggest that, being modeled after the former "official" channel but not having any actual affiliation with ABC, it could not fulfill the same function and offer the fans the same possibilities of actual dialogue with the network.

The transformation of the network-affiliated message board – borderline in terms of management by the network – into a tightly-controlled meticulously "representative" focus group

placed it firmly into the strictly-manageable category of channels of contact, and at the same time granted the feedback generated within it highly privileged status.

The level of attention allegedly paid to it by producers allows me to come to the following conclusions: first, the production team was making an effort to learn audience's opinion and act upon it, contrary to the suggestions of early political economists, who supposed that audience's opinion barely enters into the equation at all. However, only opinion of those viewers who fit the profile valued by the advertisers was sought, which fits the observations of Meehan (2005).

My second conclusion is that the carefully bounded, operationalized, reliable, rationalized and, most of all, stable construction of audience created on the message board through careful use of quotas played more important role in the attempts to find the solution to the falling ratings than the less operationalized and thus unwelcome activity of the fan group. As Hartley succinctly puts it,

> "the institutional organization of the industry seems designed not to enter into active relations with audiences as already constituted trading partners, but, on the contrary, to *produce* audiences--to invent them in its own image for its own purposes." (Hartley 1989, 237-238)

In effect, the new ABC Insider Access message board can be seen as part of the effort to create such nicely bounded "audience" to have relationship with. An "audience" that is useful – gathered in accordance with the preferences of advertisers with no less valuable parts of viewership to muddle the picture, an audience managing the feedback of which is already integrated in the ongoing production process - "phase of research", and bounded and unambiguous enough to be "invoked" (Grey 2012, 57) as an impartial argument with which to settle the conflicts arising in the process of production.

That is fully in line with the theories concerning the decision-making process of TV show writers and network executives being based on an operationalized conceptions of audience (Gitlin 1983; Hartley 1989; Anand & Peterson 2000). Producers do not ignore viewers' preferences nor do

they give viewers what they want – rather, they attempt to produce the show that they think the viewers want to see, and the methods by which they come to conclusion about what viewers want to see are subject to logic of operationalization and rationalization – necessary components is viewers preferences are to be included as a part of market information regime.

5.4 Speaking in networkese

Interestingly, Save our Soap members demonstrate a high degree of awareness about the ways audiences are conceptualized by the network. As a result, they seek to overcome the problem of the disconnect between the direction the producers take the show and their own preferences by finding the ways to articulate themselves in the ways compatible to the show producers' understanding – a phenomenon that is noted by other researchers as well (Hayward 1993; Ford 2008), although rarely given explicit attention.

One of this way is the use of strictly manageable and borderline channels of communication. ABC-affiliated mediums are perceived as having more capability to actually reach those in charge of the show than independent internet sites. In a number of press releases ABC-affiliated mediums for fan discussion, such as ABC Soaps in Depth and ABC Insider, are emphasized as separate from the unaffiliated mediums in a way that fans expect them to have greater importance and higher probability in conveying their feedback to someone actually in charge. A claim is made in the Save our Soap press-release that in some cases, fan seek out such mediums not in spite of their management by the network but because of it. "Viewers felt empowered because they had a direct channel for their thoughts, complaints, concerns, and compliments to be heard by those in charge" – says the press-release describing the dissolution of "open" ABC Insider Access board – a notion which might be perceived as contradictory to Bielby's (1999) idea of fan empowerment as lying in ability to make their claims of expertise over the show

uninterrupted by the network, although it should be kept in mind that Bielby's essay, like most others of similar kind, focused more on interpretative power and symbolic ownership of the narrative rather than deliberate attempts to influence change. It might as well be that channels less manageable by the network are more conductive to one type of empowerment but not to the other.

The other way is adoption of the concept of audience as embraced by industry in order to make their point. The concept of audience as a commodity which is only valuable in as much as it is valuable to advertisers and defined first and foremost through ratings is used widely and creatively throughout Save our Soap press-releases.

More than half of press-releases by Save our Soap group opened with a report about ratings, such as this:

> «Since the beginning of April of 2009, General Hospital has hit new lows in total viewers, HH, and in the women 18-49 demographic (2,360,000, 1.8 rating and 1.1 rating respectively, for the week ending April 24, 2009). For the last three weeks (ending June 12, 2009), ratings for total viewers have been at a steady 1.9, a decline of 14-17% from 2008». [3]

Ratings are utilized in several ways, most notably as an argument for the changes in the storyline towards the direction preferred by Save our Soap group and as a way to legitimate the group's own claims to represent wider audience and speak for it

> "This separation [of couples favoured by Save our Soap group] is depriving many viewers of what used to be an enjoyable experience. Evidence of this is apparent in last week's numbers when only 754,000 women in the 18-49 demographic watched the show, down 7,000 viewers from GH's previous all time low of 761,000 (week ending April 24, 2009)."[4]

[3] http://www.saveoursoapgh.com/SOS%20PR%202%206%2022%2009.pdf
[4] http://www.saveoursoapgh.com/SOS%20PR%203%206%2029%2009.pdf

Note how ratings are used to make claim that preferences of Save our Soap group – a relatively small and obscure fangroup – are shared by "many viewers".

Different importance afforded to different types of viewers, as well as the source of this difference – value to advertisers – is also taken into account. Demographics known to be valued by advertisers are flaunted to make a point that current direction of General Hospital alienates exactly the type of viewers that the network would want to keep: "GH has become a shell of its former self in the all-important women 18-49 demographic, which is highly valued by advertisers."

Whereas when what they perceive as catering to the demographic preferences of which don't match their own, attempts are made to either devalue the importance of such demographic using the logic of rationalization and profit:

> "In an effort to attract new, teen viewers, soaps, including GH, have cast younger actors, but are finding that the number of younger viewers willing to sit for an hour a day is dwindling. Additionally, this portion of the total viewing audience is but a fragment of the total audience; therefore, spending so much time and money courting this age group is reckless and not cost effective"[5]

Or to showcase alienated demographic as a part of viewers the preferences of which should not be ignored appealing exactly to their spending power as consumers and thus potential value to advertisers:

> "The 35-54 female audience and beyond are often the viewers who have watched for many years and appreciate and watch for character-driven storylines and historical integrity. These are the viewers that, in the past, would often introduce their children and grandchildren to the shows. These are the viewers who are now in the workforce and will spend their income on hair color, medicine,

[5] http://www.saveoursoapgh.com/SOS%20PR10%20final.pdf

beauty and skin care products and more, not only because they are maturing, but because they want to continue to look and feel their best"

Reliance on advertisers in itself is also used as an argument.

"Since the week of that episode, April 7, 2008, and in the coveted 18-49 demographic, GH has lost 29% of its audience. One has to wonder if management at ABC/Disney realizes that the audience that is no longer there is made up of individuals who are no longer watching the advertisements paid for by their sponsors as well as the advertisements for their very own nighttime programming"[6]

They are also aware that producers often, and not without some reason (see Baym 2000) see negative comments as a sign of investment from viewers and not as an indicator that a viewer might potentially be lost to the network, while only an actual loss of viewer matters (Levine 2001), even quoting the interview with the then-executive producer of "General Hospital" Jill Farren Phelps which expressed similar sentiments. To such notion they offer their acknowledgment and retort, saying:

"Sadly, GH has gone well beyond the point of creating stories that have people mad, but glued to the set. With the dramatic fall in the ratings, long-time fans, some who have watched GH for 20 years or more, have been letting management know that they have quit watching, why, and what it would take for GH to get them back as regular viewers. These very fans are not mad while they continue to watch, they are apathetic and have quit watching. Obviously, this is **not** good." (emphasis in the original)

[6] http://www.saveoursoapgh.com/PR%209%209.11.pdf

All this suggests that the members of the Save our Soap group demonstrate what Buckman (1985, In Ford 2008) describes as a "political sense of their own power", as well as of it's limitations. They know that the show cannot consistently draw high ratings without loyal viewer base of which they part, and that if they withdraw their loyalty it might as well mean cancellation of the show. According to Buckman, they are quite aware that the networks value viewers in terms of desirability for advertiser, and have a rather clear idea about which categories are considered "valuable". Some viewers in the "less valuable" demographics such as those above the target age express awareness that they do not present enough market force to influence producers.

This account contradicts those offered by some earlier studies of audience's perception (Bielby et al. 1999; Baym 2000) in which viewers are shown as trying to justify their claims to narrative in terms of quality, aesthetics and continuity, with they arguments demonstrating that they perceive a profound tension between "what's good" and "what sells" (Bielby et al. 1999, 37). The account of Save our Soap group, however, demonstrates a picture that is somewhat more complicated. While arguments based on the text itself, aesthetic preference and continuity are prevalent, they are also supplemented by frequent appeals to commercial success, and in attempts to effectively communicate with the network Save our Soap group often claims that not only are the current General Hospital storylines unsatisfactory for aesthetic reasons, but that they also don't sell.

The only break from such high degree of awareness about audience-advertiser-network relationship is the insistence with which viewers are referred to as "customers" of ABC/Disney, which is somewhat surprising considering that, as I've established previously, Save our Soap group demonstrates significant awareness of themselves as a commodity audience and a product offered to an advertiser. However, as can be inferred from the quotes above, referring to viewers as customers might be a case of incorrect terminology instead of incorrect understanding, or, in addition, an attempt to claim the title of a customer who would then be, in analogy to retail services, assumed to be always right.

Such awareness of the industry's conception of themselves and deliberate use of such conceptions might be explained by an observation that fans, as opposed to most other type of viewers, derive pleasure from knowing, and sharing knowledge of, the circumstances surrounding the production of the show (Jenkins 1992; Bielby et al. 1999; Baym 2000). In additions, some authors suggest that the magazines focused on the subject of daytime serials might be one of the contributing factors to such viewer awareness, noting both the formative role of the "soap" magazines to the early fan discussion (Bielby et al. 1999; Ford 2008) and the emphasis which such publications often place on some economic aspects of "soap opera" broadcasting, with regular reports on ratings, sponsors and desirable audiences (White 1992). To what extent such awareness of the production process can be extrapolated to more broad category of viewers is up to debate, but it still suggests that the idea that most viewers regard television programming as just a source of "free" entertainment, oblivious to the economic relations surrounding it and the means by which channels really gain their profits (Budd & Steinman 1989; Allen 1992) might be oversimplifying audience's relationship with an industry and giving viewers too little credit.

To summarize, the apparent lack of effect of both fan campaign as an "active" expression of viewers' preferences and ratings as a "passive" one upon the contents of General Hospital are better explained through the way in which viewers themselves and their preferences are conceptualized and made known to the industry. In order to affect the show, preferences of viewers have to be not only known but be operationalized and rendered in the way compatible with existing routines of production. Members of the Save our Soap group demonstrate a high degree of awareness of this process and attempt to adapt to it. They are aware that the industry conceptualizes audience not as a group of receives of TV messages but as a commodity form developed to be sold to advertisers (Budd & Steinman 1989), and in turn attempt to adopt the same conception of audience, transforming themselves rhetorically from community of viewers to valuable commodity – on the value of which they incessantly insist – in order to persuade the network.

CONCLUSIONS

My analysis of the case of "General Hospital" and the "Save our Soap" campaign did not discern any significant correlation between the contents of the show and both expressed preferences of the viewers involved in that particular campaign and aggregated preferences of a restricted category of viewers expressed through ratings. However, such result should not be interpreted as lack of attempts from the producers of "General Hospital" to incorporate preferences of a particular group of viewers best described as a commodity audience valued by advertisers into the show. Both points of view outlined in the introduction – that the producers are constrained by the preferences of their intended audience and that they disregard such preferences entirely – can be reconciled through adding the ways in which audience is conceptualized, made known and operationalized by the industry into equation.

In other words, in accordance to the theories offered by Hartley, Gitlin and Anand & Peterson, what appears on TV might be at least partially explained through the way in which corporate executives and professional producers imagine audiences, which in turn depends both on the operational procedures that create the image of audiences on industrial level and on actual behavior of the viewers in as far as that behavior provides data for operational procedures, and television entertainment tends to reflect not reality, authors' or executives' personal tastes or preferences of audience, but rather producers' perception of symbolic universe that supports advertising (Meehan 2005), and producers tailor their programs to "what they think the cardboard people they've conjured up want to see and hear" (Gitlin 1983, 203).

The degree to which expressed preferences of viewers might influence content of TV program depends heavily on the channel and form used to convey such preference, with certain channels and forms being privileged over others. Contrary to the suggestions of Bielby and

Harrington, greater degree of independence from the network does not seem to result in greater impact of the use of the channel. An opposite tendency can be observed – channels that can be more strictly managed by the producers appear to have more impact upon the content.

The members of Save our Soap group demonstrated clear awareness both about the ways in which viewers are conceptualized in the TV industry as commodity audience, and about operationalized channels more amenable to the management by the producers being privileged over viewer-initiated less strictly managed forms of contact. In addition, in order to persuade the network in the necessity of taking their preferences into consideration, they sometimes deliberately adopt the view of audience as a commodity and appeal to ABC through stressing the value of such commodity and possibility of losing it, as well as widely utilizing the codes of network such as audience constituted through ratings in order to justify their own claims to represent "The Audience".

It was not the question of this whether such awareness of industry's conception of audience and perchance for creatively utilizing it demonstrated by "Save our Soap" group can be extrapolated on viewers in general, and thus whether it is in contradiction with the views about audience as capable of making only aesthetic and ideological judgments about TV content without reflecting upon the conditions of it's production, but I think that further research in that direction will prove to be fruitful. That groups of viewers differ in their capability to offer resistive interpretations of TV content is established, among others, by Morley (1992), and it seems plausible to suggest that similar differences with regards to the capability to discern production conditions and their impact upon content would be different for various groups of viewers, with difference being the level of income, education, or activity as in distinction between "viewer" and "fan". If such difference is to be found, it would suggest that different groups of viewers have different chances to successfully navigate the industry's conception of themselves and thus greater chance make their preferences reflected in TV programming.

APPENDIX

Table 1.

Proportion of character sets preferred and disliked by "Save our Soap" group, before, during and after the time of group's activity

Week	Preferred Set	Disliked Set	Week	Preferred Set	Disliked Set
Jan 5-9 2009	89.87%	10.13%	Mar 15-19 2010	70.83%	29.17%
Jan 12-16 2009	93.11%	6.89%	Mar 22-26 2010	69.45%	30.55%
Jan 19-23 2009	88.53%	11.47%	Mar 29-Apr 2 2010	66.30%	33.70%
Jan 26-30 2009	88.30%	11.70%	Apr 5-9 2010	60.85%	39.15%
Feb 2-6 2009	90.03%	9.97%	Apr 12-16 2010	67.83%	32.17%
Feb 9-13 2009	83.40%	16.60%	Apr 19-23 2010	65.98%	34.02%
Feb 16-20 2009	84.21%	15.79%	Apr 26-30 2010	56.46%	43.54%
Feb 27-27 2009	82.46%	17.54%	May 3-7 2010	69.00%	31.00%
Mar 2-6 2009	78.83%	21.17%	May 10-14 2010	75.87%	24.13%
Mar 9-13 2009	86.19%	13.81%	May 17-21 2010	68.45%	31.55%
Mar 16-20 2009	90.48%	9.52%	May 24-28 2010	61.97%	38.03%
Mar 23-27 2009	81.51%	18.49%	Jun 7-11 2010	61.99%	38.01%
Mar 30-Apr 3 2009	77.64%	22.36%	Jun 14-18 2010	51.86%	48.14%
Apr 6-10 2009	79.89%	20.11%	Jun 21-25 2010	59.95%	40.05%
Apr 13-17 2009	80.65%	19.35%	Jun 28-July 2 2010	63.17%	36.83%
Apr 20-24 2009	84.81%	15.19%	Jul 12-16 2010	69.71%	30.29%
Apr 27-May 1 2009	84.30%	15.70%	Jul 19-23 2010	65.07%	34.93%
May 4-8 2009	80.86%	19.14%	Jul 26-30 2010	64.56%	35.44%
May 11-15 2009	81.01%	18.99%	Aug 2-6 2010	67.99%	32.01%
May 18-22 2009	76.80%	23.20%	Aug 9-13 2010	50.25%	49.75%
Jun 1-5 2009	70.82%	29.18%	Aug 16-20 2010	62.46%	37.54%
Jun 8-12 2009	73.19%	26.81%	Aug 23-27 2010	57.23%	42.77%
Jun 15-19 2009	70.39%	29.61%	Aug 30-Sept 3 2010	60.47%	39.53%
Jun 22-26 2009	69.57%	30.43%	Sept 13-17 2010	55.96%	44.04%
Jul 6-10 2009	73.03%	26.97%	Sept 20-24 2010	64.60%	35.40%
Jul 13-17 2009	65.44%	34.56%	Sept 28-Oct 1 2010	60.36%	39.64%
Jul 20-24 2009	68.72%	31.28%	Oct 4-8 2010	64.47%	35.53%
Jul 27-31 2009	77.75%	22.25%	Oct 11-15 2010	64.44%	35.56%
Aug 3-7 2009	64.84%	35.16%	Oct 18-22 2010	59.64%	40.36%
Aug 10-14 2009	60.64%	39.36%	Nov 1-5 2010	62.94%	37.06%
Aug 17-21 2009	73.49%	26.51%	Nov 8-12 2010	63.90%	36.10%
Aug 24-28 2009	65.52%	34.48%	Nov 15-19 2010	59.13%	40.87%
Aug 31-Sept 4 2009	71.46%	28.54%	Nov 29-Dec 3 2010	67.50%	32.50%
Sept 14-18 2009	70.06%	29.94%	Dec 6-10 2010	53.20%	46.80%
Sept 21-25 2009	70.06%	29.94%	Dec 13-17 2010	59.79%	40.21%
Sept 28-Oct 2 2009	64.49%	35.51%			
Oct 5-9 2009	57.76%	42.24%			
Oct 12-16 2009	68.62%	31.38%			
Oct 19-23 2009	67.97%	32.03%			
Oct 26-30 2009	68.77%	31.23%			
Nov 2-6 2009	72.75%	27.25%			
Nov 9-13 2009	75.82%	24.18%			
Nov 16-20 2009	80.12%	19.88%			
Nov 30-Dec 4 2009	77.44%	22.56%			
Dec 7-11 2009	71.79%	28.21%			
Dec 14-18 2009	69.71%	30.29%			
Jan 4-8 2010	68.50%	31.50%			
Jan 11-15 2010	71.67%	28.33%			
Jan 18-22 2010	77.06%	22.94%			
Jan 25-29 2010	71.39%	28.61%			
Feb 1-5 2010	68.09%	31.91%			
Feb 8-12 2010	78.03%	21.97%			
Feb 15-19 2010	79.42%	20.58%			
Feb 22-26 2010	70.03%	29.97%			
Mar 1-5 2010	72.73%	27.27%			
Mar 8-12 2010	67.96%	32.04%			

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