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What Women Watch on TV Their viewing habits may surprise you By Sam Thielman

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Television



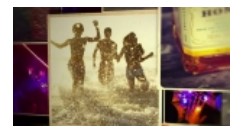
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In last season's premiere of FX's *American Horror Story*, two teenagers are lying on the bed, nervously making out. "I don't want to hurt you," says the boy, moments before having a seizure, bleeding profusely from his eyes, nose and mouth, and then dying. If viewers were hoping for a respite from the race-hate charged torture sequence that immediately preceded the scene, they didn't get it. What kind of show is this? Call it television for women.

First, some data. On cable, *AHS: Coven* was the most popular series in the two most vital female demos—the 18-49 "dollar demo" (2.6 million live-plus-7 viewers, meaning many ad-valued moms liked it) and 12-34 (1.8 million, meaning that teens, who are far less likely to watch TV, liked it). The show skews female, with women comprising 59 percent of its viewership. After that, the most popular scripted series on cable were dramas about zombies (AMC's *The Walking Dead*, 1.9 million) and biker gangs (FX's *Sons of Anarchy*, 1.2 million) and, of course, murdered high schoolers (ABC Family's *Pretty Little Liars*, 1.3 million).

It turns out that the revolution in cable that gave rise to testosteriffic dramas like *The*

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Sopranos, Breaking Bad and Mad Men has been plenty good to women, too. The cast of AHS: Coven is mostly female, and Katey Sagal plays arguably the most interesting character on the show in Sons of Anarchy. The Walking Dead has Michonne, played by Danai Gurira, an award-winning playwright. Television is, after a long time, a place to find women who are accomplished on their own terms.

“Even sci-fi has changed,” says Katherine Wintch of consultancy **The Mom Complex**. “When you look at Game of Thrones or American Horror Story, it’s a whole new [world] that’s opened up for female characters.” And there are huge, female-dominated fandoms for series like **BBC America’s Doctor Who** and PBS’ Sherlock—both bastions of male nerdery.

Other genres have also changed to accommodate women. “You have female characters in political shows: Julia Louis-Dreyfus in [HBO’s] Veep, Olivia Pope [Kerry Washington] in [ABC’s] Scandal,” says Wintch.

On the broadcast front, Scandal and ABC’s Grey’s Anatomy dominate the landscape alongside football and the music competition juggernauts NBC’s **The Voice** and Fox’s American Idol, as well as CBS’ ubiquitous The Big Bang Theory. Wintch says she thinks the scripted series that hit with women manage to convey nuances men don’t necessarily get. “I feel like my husband watches [Pope] and his only comment every weekend is, ‘She’s such a slut,’” Wintch says. “And I watch it and I think ‘She’s so broken, she’s so flawed, and that’s why she’s looking for love with these men.’”

Purchasing power

Part of the reason so much is available to women now as opposed to a decade ago is simply that as viewership has fragmented still further, men have become less important to advertisers who want to reach viewers with control over disposable income. (According to the Boston Consulting Group, women control or influence 73 percent of all household purchases.)

Another factor: The recovery from the recession is benefiting women more than men. The Economic Policy Institute estimates that as of four months ago, women had recovered all jobs lost and were beginning to make up for lost time while men were still 2.1 million jobs short. “Women control the family finances and are weighing in increasingly heavily with their own finances,” says Kate Juergens, evp, original programming and development and chief creative officer of ABC Family. “They make all the major purchasing decisions and control the TV dial a lot of the time, except for sports events. More college graduating classes [are made up mostly of] women. More law school applicants are women.”

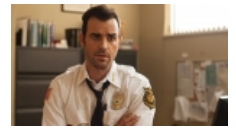
With cable networks having proliferated since the ’90s, the rise of the female network seemed inevitable—among them, Bravo, TLC, We and OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network. But the evolution of the market suggests a different fait accompli: the obsolescence of the female network. After all, if all of TV is for women, why ghettoize them?

Women’s TV execs are, naturally, quick to defend their turf. At a women’s network, “you’re speaking more directly to them and to their passions,” says Sharon O’Sullivan, evp, ad sales at Discovery Communications, where she oversees networks including female-skewing ID, TLC and Animal Planet. “The average length of tune on ID [which is heavily female] is 51 minutes.” (That’s very high.)

But there can be problems, O’Sullivan admits—many of them stemming from knowing what women you’re trying to reach and how they’ll react to your programming. “We had a series last year called Sin City Rules [on TLC],” O’Sullivan recalls. “That was a group of women in Las Vegas on a trip who were put together in a somewhat contrived environment. It was not as authentic as our viewers expect.” The show was canceled after five low-rated episodes—an oddity on cable, where series usually get to finish at least one season.

O’Sullivan says it was a learning experience. “What we realized from that show failing on our air was that that’s not what we’re here for,” she says. Accordingly, TLC is working to

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improve its brand—expect to see the signature red door open for the first time—and it’s eschewing the ginned-up (sometimes literally) drama that characterizes other reality shows that might work in a different environment in favor of less obviously contrived shows. “You can evolve your brand, but the consumer also has an expectation of it,” she adds.

Who Knew?

More women 18-49 watch **Sunday Night Football** on NBC (3.5 million) than **The Bachelorette** (2.5 million).

Among young women (12-34) last year, the only reality show in **cable's top 10** was **Teen Mom 2**, with 927,000 viewers. In the top 10 for women 18-49 and 25-54, there were no reality shows.

Talking Dead, AMC's talk show about *The Walking Dead*, is a **top 10 cable series** in all three major female demos (No. 7 among women 12-34 and No. 4 among both women 18-49 and women 25-54).

Last year, for the first time in history, more **women had drivers' licenses than men**. GM appointed **Mary T. Barra** its first female CEO last month.

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Mik • 2 months ago

Hell, look at a show like Top Gear, about cars. It's probably the world's most widely watched show. The show and the BBC reported that it gets something like 250-350 Million views PER WEEK, during the season, in about 170 different countries. And get this, the show said that roughly half of their viewership is women. Booya.

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