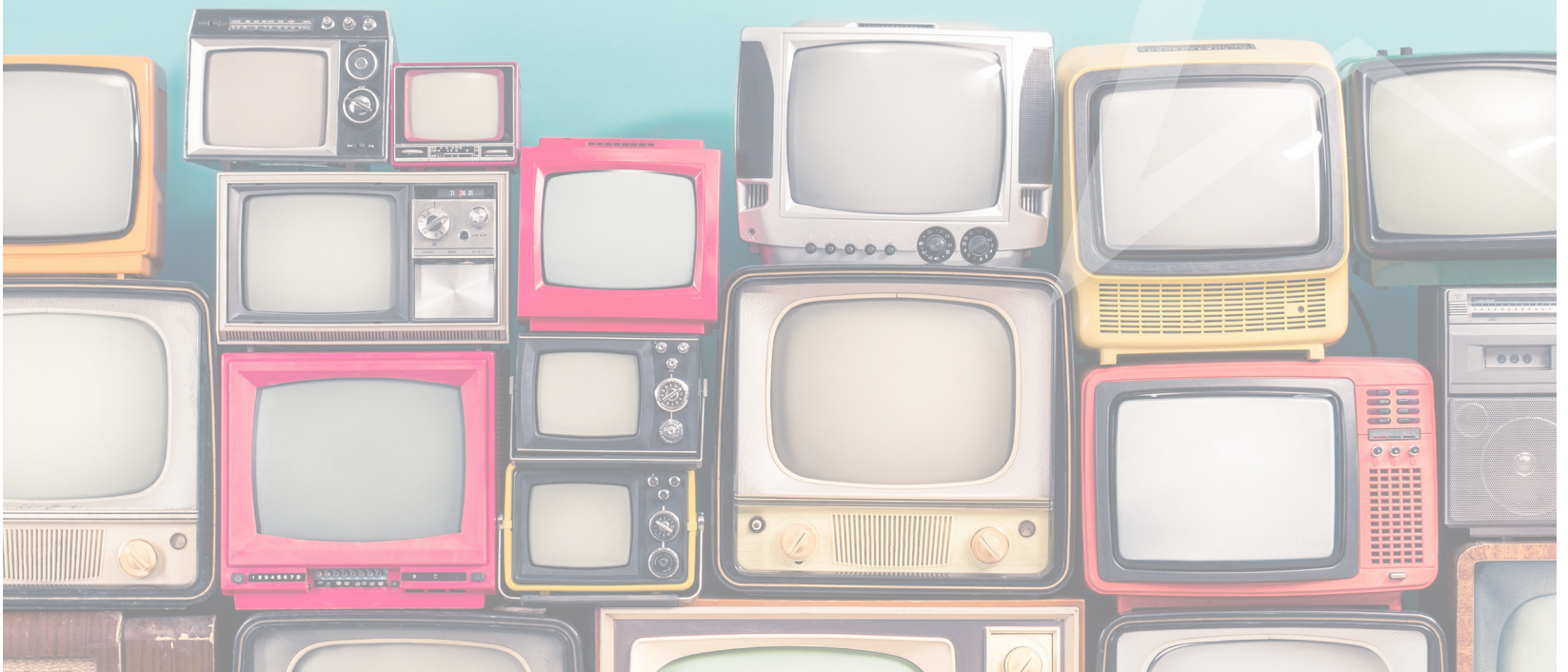




Shared Screens: Scripted Television's Communal Space in a Polarized Nation

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Of the TV shows favored equally by American liberals and conservatives, what does their content tend to have in common?

More and more, it seems as though American liberals and conservatives live in parallel cultural worlds. They tend to prefer different living environments, college majors, and careers. More superficially, they exhibit different preferences in groceries, coffee, fine art, jokes, baby names – the list goes on and on¹. This cultural divide is a manifestation of extreme partisan polarization. Can polarization be mitigated, then, by bridging that divide?

In communal cultural space, experiences can be shared and social cohesion maintained. And the substance of that space can be a tool for suggesting new worldviews, emphasizing certain values, and modeling new norms of conduct. In particular, a television program that is enjoyed by both liberals and conservatives may have the power to foster empathy for members of political outgroups, put a human face on otherwise abstract and alien ideological perspectives, and nurture a sense of shared (rather than adversarial) social identity.

This study examines TV shows that are watched by liberals, conservatives, and moderates in roughly equal proportion. What do they tend to have common?

To answer that question, this study uses data from the annual National Consumer Survey to identify a collection of 32 different shows – a mix of programs with the most liberal-skewed audiences, the most conservative-skewed audiences, and the most “communal” audiences (everyone watches it equally). The 12 most communal shows are listed in Table 1. The four most skewed shows comprise

Table 2. Negative Audience Ideology scores mean the show’s audience is primarily liberal. Positive scores mean the audience is primarily conservative. Scores nearer to zero mean the show is more communal; scores further from zero mean the viewership is more “segmented” (watched disproportionately by one political group or the other).

Table 1: Most Politically Communal TV Programs (2019)

Show	Audience Ideology
YOUNG SHELDON	0
BLACK-ISH	0
ELEMENTARY	1
THE GOOD WIFE	-3
THE WALKING DEAD	-3
FEAR THE WALKING DEAD	3
NEW AMSTERDAM	3
THE GOLDBERGS	-4
MOM	-4
TAKE TWO	4
BLINDSPOT	11
CRIMINAL MINDS	13

Table 2: Most Politically Segmented TV Programs (2019)

Show	Audience Ideology
GOOD PLACE	-139
VEEP	-114
LAST MAN STANDING	85
WHEN CALLS THE HEART	93

A team of six research assistants watched three episodes of each show. The research assistants were not told why those shows were selected for them, or that the study had anything to do with politics. Rather, they were merely instructed to rate each episode on a series of qualities called "Story Features." Those Story Features are listed below in Table 3.

The scores from the research assistants reveal that the shows with liberal audiences, relative to the conservative ones: (1) are more stylistically novel;

(2) feature protagonists who are social outcasts; (3) present more moral ambiguity in its lead characters; (4) have storylines that take longer to resolve; (5) feature more diverse casts; and (6) contain more explicit depictions of sex and body functions. As a corollary, the shows with a conservative audience, relative to the liberal ones: (1) have more conventional structure and style; (2) center on characters in positions of traditional authority; (3) feature clearer "good guys" and "bad guys"; (4) resolve storylines within individual episodes; (5) employ casts that are primarily white, straight, and male; and (6) are more "wholesome" regarding sex and body functions.

The values for each Story Feature were then averaged together to create a total score that I call the "Diagnostic Index." That Diagnostic Index runs from scores of -2 to +2. In Figure 1 below, each dot represents a particular program, colored according to the skew of its audience. Positions on the horizontal axis represent the program's Audience Ideology, while the vertical axis indicates

Table 3: Story Features

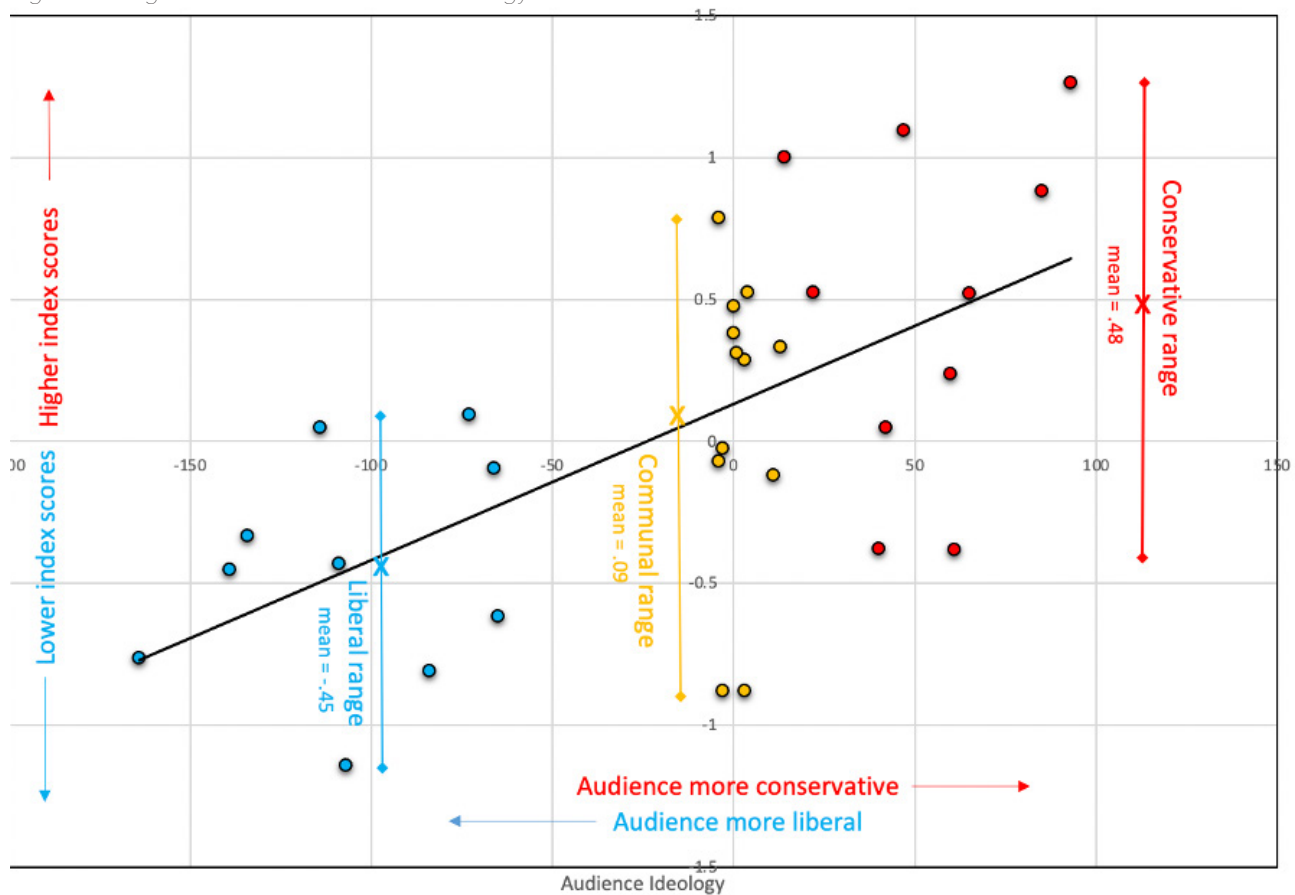
Feature	Inquiry	"Liberal" Pole (-2)	"Conservative" Pole (+2)
Style	Is the show's style more novel, or more conventional?	Novel/ experimental	Traditional/ familiar
Setting	Are the show's protagonists socially marginalized, or are they in positions of authority?	Marginalized/ outcasts	Conventional authorities
Themes	Is the show morally ambiguous, or is there a clear depiction of good vs. bad?	Ambiguous/ gray	Stark/ black & white
Plots	Do plotlines stretch across episodes, or is there tidy resolution?	Serialized	Concise/ episodic
Cast	How diverse is the show's primary cast?	Diverse	Homogenous
Stakes	Are the characters' risks mainly social/psychological, or are they in physical danger?	Social/ psychological	Physical danger
Edge	Are there profane elements, or is the show family-friendly?	Profane	Wholesome

the program's average score on the Diagnostic Index. The liberal shows tend to have negative scores, conservative shows tend to have positive scores, and communal shows tend to have scores near zero.

Features that appeal more to conservatives, and others that draw more liberals. A communal show can have values on one or more Features that are quite extreme, as long as the effect is balanced out by Features that skew in the opposite direction.

Even though the communal shows tend to have Diagnostic Index scores near zero, this does not mean that a communal show tends to score near zero for each individual Story Feature. Rather, the Features commonly average each other out, with each communal show tending to have some

Figure 1: Diagnostic Index vs. Audience Ideology

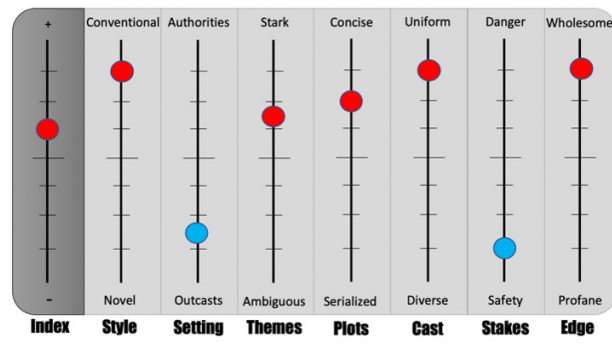


Each communal show accomplishes its balance in its own way. Figure 2 below illustrates the Story Feature scores for each communal program, with brief annotations.

Figure 2: Story Feature Scores for Each Communal Show

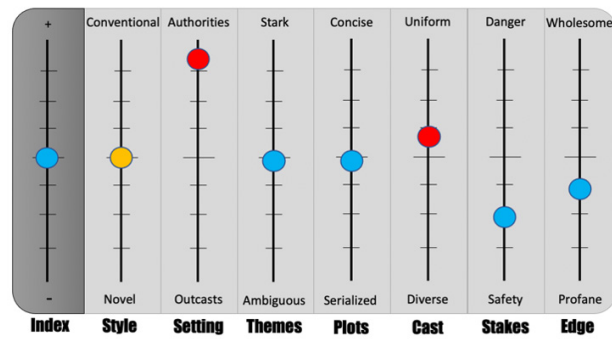
Young Sheldon

This show is a spinoff of The Big Bang Theory, which is as conventional as a modern sitcom gets. Sheldon adds some stylistic flair by switching to a film-style, single-camera method, ditching the studio set and laugh track. While still traditional by most measures, it may draw liberal intrigue because its titular character is a science-obsessed boy with characteristics consistent with the autism spectrum - the sort of social “outcast” that is typically unpopular among conservative audiences.



The Good Wife

Because the legal drama ended in 2016, 2019 audiences were watching the show as reruns – a format that seems to make otherwise liberal-pleasing content more approachable for conservatives. The blend of serialized and procedural plots is moderate-friendly, as are elements that are just novel/edgy enough to hold liberal attention without turning off conservatives. The show balances a strong female lead with a largely white cast of conventional authority figures.



Elementary

Conservatives are likely drawn to the established “brand” (Sherlock Holmes), and the format of a generally-traditional police procedural. Liberals may find appeal in the modernization of old characters, a cast that adds some diversity from the familiar tales (e.g. Lucy Liu as Dr. Watson), and some edgy elements like Sherlock’s drug addiction.

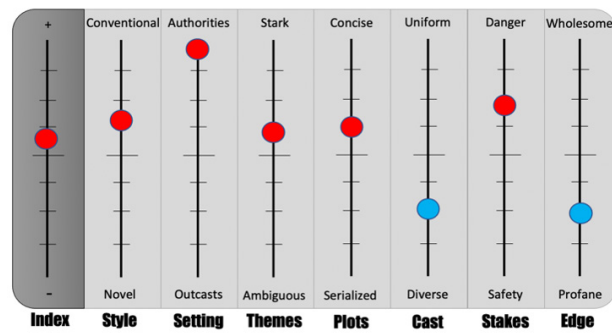
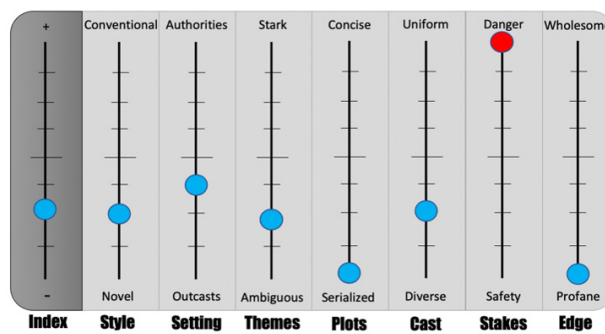


Figure 2 (Continued): Story Feature Scores for Each Communal Show

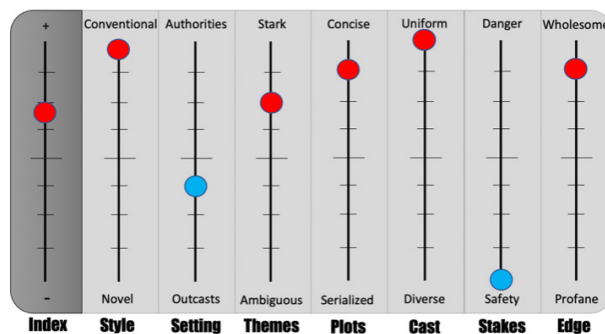
The Walking Dead

Along with its spin-off, also on this list, this gritty serialized zombie drama is an outlier in the relationship between my diagnostic measures and the audience ideology – the data suggest that the show “should” skew quite liberal. However, a couple conservative-friendly elements may escape measurement. For one, this is a clear “good vs. evil” show, with the zombies being a subhuman outgroup presenting a constant menace. For another, the world of the show is a rugged survivalist’s post-apocalyptic dream.



The Goldbergs

As the scores here capture, *The Goldbergs* is in many ways a traditional – indeed retro – sitcom. Its straightforward, formulaic structure, throwback family dynamics, and nostalgic themes are likely appealing to conservatives. Yet despite not being reflected in the Reviewers’ scores (to whom the cast may have simply read as “white”) the show centers on a Jewish family, which adds an element of diversity. And similar to *Young Sheldon*, focusing on a nerdy boy with a sci-fi and pop culture obsession is likely to appeal to liberal audiences.



Fear the Walking Dead

Like its predecessor discussed above, this violent zombie spinoff is likely to turn off elderly church-going conservative types. But it may hold great appeal for a different and emerging conservative demographic – the hyper-masculine, video-gaming, Reddit-frequenting, thrill-seeking young white men who feel constrained and excluded by the “political correctness” of modern society, and enjoy imagining a more primal alternative.

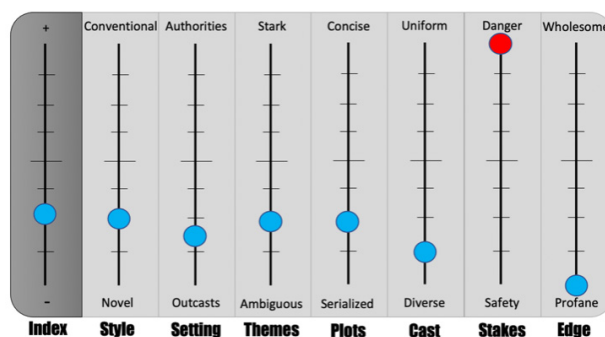
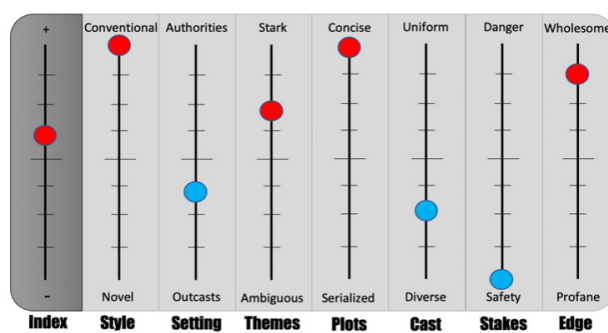


Figure 2 (Continued): Story Feature Scores for Each Communal Show

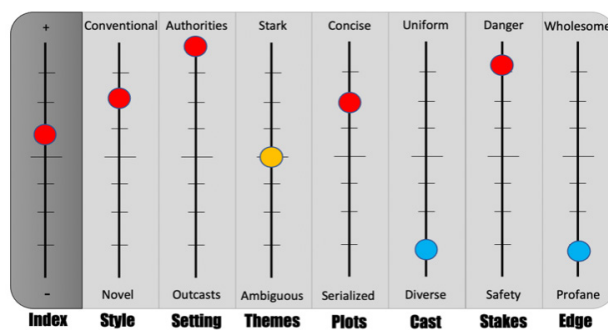
Black-ish

Because of its black cast and explicitly race-related storylines, it may seem surprising that the show draws in conservatives at roughly the same rate as liberals. But, as the title suggests, and similar to *The Cosby Show* in the 1980s, the black family is very conventional, which may make the diversity more palatable to those who would otherwise be averse. And as the scores here capture, other than a cast of color, the show is very traditional and formulaic in a way that likely feels comfortable to conservative audiences. Also of note, the communality Audience Ideology score here is specifically for syndicated reruns of the show – a format that seems to somehow allow otherwise liberal-skewing programs to draw a more balanced audience.



Criminal Minds

Criminal Minds seems to have found crossover appeal by taking the familiar structure of a police procedural and adding some dark themes, edgy elements, and cast diversity. This general strategy – a novel, edgy take on an otherwise predictable format – may be a dependable formula for attracting both liberals and conservatives.



Mom

This show provides another model for mixing conservative-friendly formulaic structure with edgier elements that appeal to liberals. *Mom* is an increasingly bygone breed of multi-camera, studio-shot, laugh-track sitcoms – a style that likely feels comfortable to conservatives. But within that framework, *Mom* tackles darker themes (e.g. addiction, mental illness, financial struggle) and features flawed characters in marginalized positions.

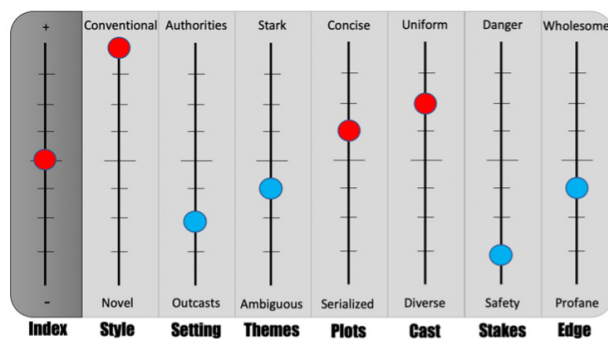
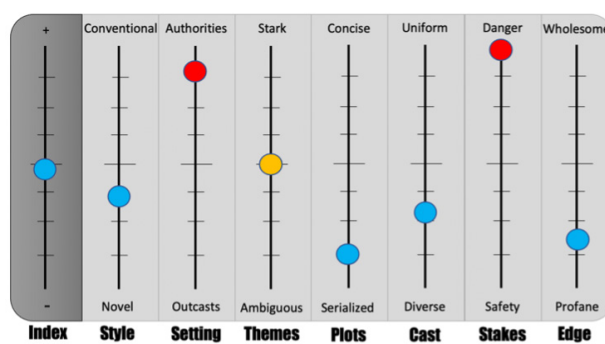


Figure 2 (Continued): Story Feature Scores for Each Communal Show

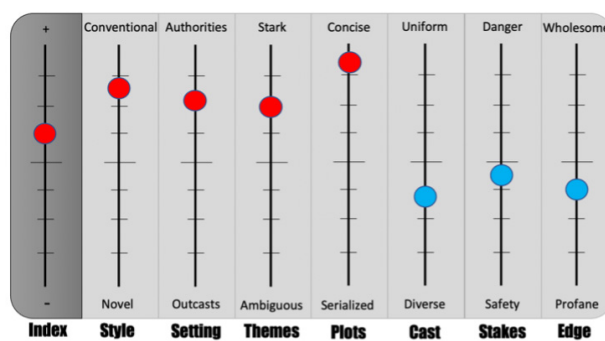
Blindspot

Like others on the list, *Blindspot* takes the general form of a standard, action-heavy police procedural, but adds novel elements that may capture the attention of more liberal audiences. Moody tones, a long metaplot, and edgy themes exist within a pretty standard “cops vs. shadowy bad guys” structure, allowing for crossover appeal.



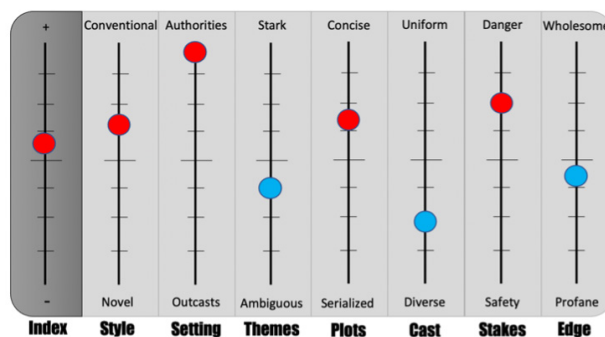
Take Two

Take Two provides yet another example of starting with a conservative-friendly genre – police procedural with self-contained episodes – and layering in some “hipper” elements that feel interesting to an audience with a taste for novelty. Here, one of the detectives is a once-popular actor who is researching a role as an investigator before realizing she has an actual knack for fighting crime. The show, then, has a semi-comedic tone and premise that represent a departure from an otherwise predictable genre.



New Amsterdam

Yet again here, a show achieves communal appeal by adding novel elements to a familiar formula. *New Amsterdam* is in most ways a conventional hospital procedural, but adds a diverse cast, some serialized plotlines, and a “reform the broken system” premise that might help attract the attention of a liberal audience.



What are the major takeaways from this data?

First, communal programs find a way to balance elements that appeal to liberal audiences with elements that appeal to conservatives. Sometimes, this means that no single element of a show – style, stakes, edge, etc. – is too extreme in one direction or the other. As examples, *The Good Wife* and *Elementary* have mid-level scores on almost every Story Feature. But more commonly, a communal program has some elements that skew hard in one direction, balanced against other elements that skew hard in the other. As examples, both *Young Sheldon* and *Mom* are very stylistically conventional (which tends to draw conservatives), but also strongly feature characters that are marginalized because of traits like addiction or autism – elements that tend to attract liberals. Those elements essentially cancel each other out, leading to an overall product that is appealing to an ideologically diverse audience.

Second, no single element is a “dealbreaker” for communal appeal, as long as an overall balance exists. For example, although liberals are much more drawn to cast diversity than conservatives, a show can be very diverse and still draw a large number of conservatives. *Black-ish* and *Criminal Minds*, for instance, have quite diverse casts, but balance out that “liberal” appeal by being stylistically conventional and tidily resolving most plotlines by the end of every episode. A show can be highly wholesome (e.g. *The Goldbergs*) and still attract liberals, or highly profane (e.g. *The Walking Dead*) and still attract conservatives.

Finally, a common way these communal shows achieve balance is by taking a familiar and predictable genre and finding certain ways to subvert it. Several communal shows, for example, add novel twists to the police/detective procedural – a genre that is often numbingly formulaic. *Take Two* makes one of its detectives a C-list actress who initially is only present to research an upcoming role, and adds a comedic aspect that is atypical for the genre. *Elementary* takes the familiar Sherlock Holmes characters, diversifies them, and recontextualizes the setting to modern-day America. *Blindspot* largely eschews the new-episode-new-case convention, in favor of a long metaplot that spans across episodes and seasons. Both it and *Criminal Minds* also feature themes and tone that are darker and more ambiguous than the average procedural. *New Amsterdam* subverts aspects of the traditional medical procedural, by adding some serialized plotlines, cast diversity, and a lead character who seeks to buck convention and shake up the status quo. Similar approaches might be successfully taken with other formulaic, authority-heavy genres like legal drama, spy thriller, or space adventure.

Continued inquiry into the topic is important. As popular culture becomes increasingly fragmented, the dwindling communal space becomes more precious. By better understanding it, there is hope it can be protected and nurtured.



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