

HBO GO - AWKWARD FAMILY VIEWING

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For the past twenty years, we have been told that ours is a true Golden Age of Television. HBO was the first company to realize that the production of prestigious TV programs for the cultural elite could be just as profitable as broadcast media aimed at the traditional mainstream audience. With the slogan ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO,’ audiences learned to watch serialized television narratives in a different way: not as a casual distraction that occupied a central place in a living room, but as a valuable and complex medium that deserved to be studied, debated, analyzed, and watched with our full attention.

For the generation that has come of age in the Facebook- and Google-dominated age of platform capitalism, this perception of television has become second nature. And as this advertisement illustrates so vividly, many older viewers still labor under the misapprehension that television programming is meant to support social interactions. But the joke, of course, is that they are hopelessly old-fashioned in their understanding of this medium’s function: their children are the ones who ‘get it’ in their obvious irritation over their parents’ inappropriate attempts at small talk.

But while countless digital subscription channels offer us an endless proliferation of just this kind of Quality TV, we may wonder at what cost we have made this transition from mainstream media to hyper-individualized flows of media content. For while commercial network television was far from ideal as a vessel for debate and critique, it did at least

anchor us within a shared sense of reality – both in the social space of our living rooms and in work environments where interactions were facilitated by a common knowledge of popular culture.

Digitization and media convergence have transformed the role of mainstream media from the production of consensus to one designed to maximize and aggravate existing forms of social, cultural, and economic division. As a rapidly-growing number of streaming platforms compete for viewers with disposable income, those without the means to pay for Disney+, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Apple TV+, and Netflix are consigned to more cheaply-produced genres such as reality TV, talent competitions, and the never-ending parade of high-concept game shows. Perhaps not coincidentally, these more widely accessible ‘free’ forms of TV programming also sell us a worldview grounded in hardcore social Darwinism: a rat race in which the ‘losers’ fall by the wayside, while the rare class of ‘winners’ are rewarded with excessive material wealth, social status, and celebrity.

It is a sad form of irony indeed that a technology that was expected by so many to liberate us from the tyrannical power of commercial media has mostly worsened the problems it was supposed to solve. More than ever before, a small handful of global corporations rule over our media landscape. We pay for their services either with sizable subscription fees or by giving them our personal data for free – or, most commonly, both. The fact that the cultural elite now gets more enjoyment from watching TV feels like cold comfort in such a bleakly dystopian media life.