Producing the Imagined Audience of Offensive Screens

Abstract This chapter explores how audience members tend to distance themselves from television programmes they find 'offensive'. People we spoke to often experienced this kind of content as 'disgusting', thereby affectively producing a distinction between the self, and those tasteless, ill-informed others for whom the programme is supposedly intended. And yet, as we will discuss in this chapter, this border is far more porous than assumed. By drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, we illustrate the ambiguous nature of offensive television content and how people shift in and out of the category of the imagined audience of offensive screens. We also discuss how strategies of displacement feed into the myth of the omnipotent, sovereign audience/consumer, and consider how the link between offence and consumer choice becomes relevant for commercial and public broadcasters.

Keywords Media effects · Television · Third person effect
Self-enhancement · Disgust · Abjection

Despite a few members of the audience who seemingly took pleasure in their consumption of media content that is commonly deemed to be 'offensive', most people in our interviews were keen to distance themselves from television content they experienced as inappropriate. At the beginning of each interview, when we watched the ice-breaker video clips with our participants, they often signalled quickly that they were

displeased with what they saw. Frowns, sighs, shaking their head in disbelief, or sounds of disapproval such as tut-tut were some of the reactions we encountered. Such reactions were, of course, invited through our carefully crafted clip collection, which contained, amongst others, many 'money shots' (Grindstaff 2002) from reality television programmes and talk shows, scenes of violence, and provocative news content. These affective reactions were also partly provoked through our research method and question when we asked our participants about feelings of offence. Such a constellation of video material and research question, might indeed invite some interviewees to *perform* offence, at least at some point during the screening. Notwithstanding these considerations, it might be wrong, however, to regard people's responses as always already inauthentic. Many people were confident in speaking to us and used the clips more like a springboard to talk about other programmes and concerns. Others signalled openly to us that they knew about the intended purpose of clips or questions ("Ah, I know where you are trying to get here") but that they simply did not feel offended at all by what they just saw. Thus, this chapter (and the book more generally) does not aim to provide a complete overview about what offensive television *is* but rather it explores what people mostly *do* with content they identify as inappropriate. We find that they distance themselves from it, thereby producing themselves as subjects of value vis-à-vis an imagined audience for whom these inappropriate programmes are supposedly intended. Such a focus is important as it allows us to illustrate how offence comes to matter beyond the immediate viewing experience.

Overall, the chapter develops three key arguments. First, our findings resonate with earlier audience studies and suggest that audiences use offensive media content to distance themselves from the uncritical mass audience (for whom these programmes are apparently made) thereby producing themselves as subjects of value. The people we spoke to almost always adopted a critical position, away from the 'rest of the audience' in society, who were imagined as less sophisticated and more easily influenced and harmed by offensive content than themselves. Secondly, we argue that the affective boundary between the self-reflective individual viewer and the homogenous, uncritical 'mass audience', which is portrayed to consist of vulnerable, ill-informed and tasteless members, is more porous than initially admitted. Thus, offended audiences are a contingent category. Thirdly, we consider some of the critical implications that strategies of displacement ("offensive programmes

exist because mindless masses want to see them") have, and argue that whether or not a programme is (perceived to be) a function of consumer choice becomes an easily employed device through which people distinguish and judge television content.

Offence and the Subject of Value

People often compare their own television viewing to that of the imagined mass audience, one that is more interested, more duped, more entertained, more gullible than they are (Seiter 1990). In our interviews, people often claimed that programmes that they themselves found to be inappropriate are indeed watched and enjoyed by unknown others. An interview with Sascha, a 28-year-old hotel employee of German/Mexican descent, illustrated this point. While we were watching the ice-breaker video, Sascha interrupted when WifeSwap came up.

> Sometimes I think, well sometimes I wonder, why is this interesting to some people? Right? I'm thinking, man, who on earth watches this? I am surely not the only one who wonders about that. Well, at least, I hope I am not the only one. Because, I don't know, if I look at these people represented here, I think okay, they aren't nice or attractive or interesting in any way, and still they are on TV so that other people can watch them… I think that is crazy. And that people actually watch them, I think is even crazier. Right? So when I come across something like this on TV [Wife Swap] then it doesn't take longer than five seconds and I've switched the channel.

Sascha expresses his astonishment here that people who "aren't nice or attractive or interesting in any way" are on television. He cannot understand the appeal of such programmes ("who on earth watches this?") and claims to feel repulsed by such programmes ("when I come across something like this on TV [Wife Swap] then it doesn't take longer than five seconds and I've switched the channel"). Many have shown how interview situations invite people to 'perform' responses that are deemed appropriate for their age, and gender and construct themselves as morally superior to a supposedly uncritical mass audience (Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Skeggs et al. 2008; Seiter 1990). Also Sascha 'performs' in our interview: eager to present himself in a good light and to help with the progress of this study about offence, he claims to be offended

by 'low brow' programmes such as Wife Swap and looks for reassurance from the interviewer ("even crazier. Right?"). Sascha presents himself in the interview as having the 'right' cultural resources to 'look through' media representations, to know what 'good' television is, and to remain unaffected by the television programmes watched thereby producing himself as a 'subject of value' that constitutes itself against an imaginary 'other'. Ellen Seiter points out that "the imagination of that other television viewer is deeply implicated in the class/gender system" (1990, p. 63) thus 'low brow' programmes such as reality television or sensationalist news reports that offend the tastes of the middle-classes, are seemingly only enjoyed by working-class people and women. Pete, 53, quantity surveyor, from London explains:

> I don't watch a soap, etc. All my family—my wife and the two daughters, they watch every Jeremy Kyle episode, record it, do everything like that. I know I can't actually sit with something like that, or some bloke getting blown out of a minibus, or some bloke displaying his dirty laundry in public, but that's where everyone is different, and whilst if we were only watching one programme all the time because everyone's all the same, and we're not; some people have taste and morals, others don't. Why do people like my wife want to listen to a woman who says, I don't know the father of my five children?

Pete's interview illustrates how people sometimes distance themselves from the rest of the (female) audience through evoking notions of taste and morality. His comment echoes longstanding popular discourses that equate women's taste in media consumption with the trivial, the lowbrow and the immoral, and their viewing preferences as threatening the high standards and morals of culture (Wood 2009; Macdonald 2003). Men's talk in many instances veered towards a sexist, paternalistic critique of women, thereby trying to regulate what is deemed appropriate for valuable consumption and establishing themselves as superior. Programmes such as Jeremy Kyle or Wife Swap, which are associated with the private and personal (and thus the feminized world) were often outspokenly critiqued, thereby underlining traditionally gendered demarcations of value. People we spoke to also often invoked notions of class to distance themselves from content they judged offensive. This language was often rife with expressions of disgust and contempt. Ed, in his forties, a school teacher from London reacted strongly when asked about his feelings towards the *Jeremy Kyle* show.

It's disgusting. I just think it's another class of people that they get on there, and that watching these shows, you don't see, like, a solicitor going on there, shouting and screaming at his wife, or watching these even, it just seems to be the people that have got nothing.

Also our German participants referred often to feelings of bodily disgust when talking about the class dimensions in 'offensive' television programmes.

These shows disgust me, because it is really sad [meaning pathetic] to watch them, really. It is sad, this Hartz IV television [television for receivers of state benefits] with all their arguments and affairs. I do not want to see it. (Tina, 32, Berlin)

If I see stuff like that [refers here to *The World's Strictest Parents*], I can't enjoy my beer anymore. It makes me sick to the stomach to see programmes like this… (Bernd, pensioner, village)

There is by now a rich body of literature that investigates the links between feelings of disgust, class and television (for an overview see: Wood and Skeggs 2011). Imogen Tyler, for instance, shows how media representations of *Little Britain's Vicky Pollard* (2008) or the young mothers in *Underaged and Pregnant* (2011) draw on classed discourses about the 'dirty poor' that provoke disgust reactions from middle-class audiences. She argues cogently that audiences participate through their affective talk in the process of class making, where, to borrow the words of Stephanie Lawler, "their very selves are produced in opposition to 'the low' and the low cannot do anything but repulse them" (2005, p. 430). Through the lens of this critical scholarship, we can understand how 'offensive' television content becomes affectively pinned onto the working-class 'other' even though audience members from all social classes watch and engage with it. Affective distancing happened in our interviews not only through expression of disgust but also through laughter. Egon, for instance, a mid-thirties public relations manager from Berlin laughed while we were watching a clip from Wife Swap. He notes:

I mean that is really the class system of Germany. For the masses that is everyday life, and for those who a have a bit of intellect, for them this is just like going to a spa. You watch it, switch off your brain, and immediately you feel better [laughs again].

In this interview segment, Egon, who sees himself as a well-educated and liberal member of the middle classes, frames his statement with laughter. Some argue that laughter, especially in the form of ridicule and disgust are not oppositional but rather quite similar affective reactions (Tyler 2008; Menninghaus 2003). Both move us physically and figuratively when we feel aversion to or are moved away from the object or figure we find disgusting/laugh at. Laughter and disgust are sensations that generate affectively a boundary between us (those who are in on the joke) and those we are disgusted by/laugh at. As we see in Egon's comment, laughter, like disgust, creates a distance between 'them' and 'us', asserting moral judgments and a superior class position. Also, on a discursive level, we can see that this quote from Egon is classist: to watch programmes such as Wife Swap requires the educated, middle-class audience to 'switch off [their] brains'. Only then can they enjoy the cheap, quick pleasure that such programmes seem to hold. Thus, the imagined audience of these programmes is not only 'einkommensschwach', but also uneducated and ignorant.

It is noteworthy that most television programmes that offended our participants (violent action films, sensationalist news reports and reality television), were understood as banal and dangerous at the same time: on the one hand, they were judged as holding no value for society or the viewers who watched them. Yet, on the other hand, they arguably had the power to influence their viewers in undesirable ways, with negative consequences for the individual as well as society as a whole. Audiences often considered the most gullible were children, young people and women. Gert, a retired builder from a rural area in Bavaria was concerned about the influence that offensive media can have on younger men:

> These nonsense action movies that glorify violence. Empty of any real value, but then if you watch it… and especially if boys of 14, 15 watch it… I don't think that's right. […] Because the boys learn from what they see. That has happened often that young people copied what they have seen on television. Hold-up murder and burglary, right?

In Gert's comment, recent events that happened in his usually quiet village reverberate—an older citizen was stabbed by a young man, seemingly without any reason. But the comment also encompasses the common idea that young people's access to offensive television

programmes places them in danger (they are easily influenced and adopt the wrong values), thus making the youngsters themselves potentially dangerous. Such an understanding of offensive television is often based on the media effects model, which we encountered numerous times in our fieldwork. This model is often critiqued for its reliance on simplistic assumptions about the relationships between media use, attitudes and behaviour as it fails to explain why effects arise in some cases and not others. It does not adequately consider how people relate to other media or other sources of information and in general, most critics agree that it tends to oversimplify complex questions to do with the meanings and pleasures people derive from the media (Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Gauntlett 1998; Barker and Petley 2001). Even though these issues are widely discussed within academia, this model of understanding the relationship between media, offence and audiences seems to retain a strong grip on public discussions and dominated the ways in which others were judged by our participants as 'media victims' with only negative consequences for society. Ed from London, for instance, positions his taking of offence as a concern for vulnerable others:

> I feel genuinely concerned about the children in my school. Their mums sitting at home and watching all this filthy rubbish—they aren't really role models are they now? Filthy crap on telly.

Throughout the interview, Ed, stressed again and again how children and younger audience members especially were easily influenced by television and needed to be protected. In simultaneously portraying children as vulnerable and their mothers (note, not fathers or parents in general) as mindless consumers of "filthy crap", Ed creates a sexist discourse where others are both gullible and devoid of any worth (not "role models").

What is further noteworthy in all examples so far, is that it was always others who were affected by so-called offensive media representations, never the person we interviewed. Even though many would admit that certain images they saw on television would stick with them and preoccupy them, sometimes even for a few days, no one argued that a particular programme consumed would lead them personally into a behaviour that would affect society in undesirable ways. This so called 'third-person effect' (Davison 1983) may lead to attitudinal or behavioural outcomes, such as support for censorship or stronger regulation of media content

(more on this in Chap. 5), but it also helps with self-enhancement, as the example of Judith, a pensioner from a small village, demonstrates:

> Television shows such as Top Model anger me because others believe everything they see! We see a top model such as Claudia Schiffer [she means Heidi Klum] and then all the young girls want to be like Schiffer. But they don't understand that looking nice isn't enough. There is hard work behind this. And you have to have charisma, and these young girls they don't have this AT ALL…

Here, Judith portrays young women as easily influenced and gullible, thereby producing herself as the voice of reason and expertise: not only is she clever enough to see through this mechanism, but she is also expert enough to say that they lack the real quality it takes to be a model: charisma. What we can see in Judith's comment is that the imagined gullible audience is constructed not only as inexperienced, but also as worthy of contempt. Judith repeats the well-rehearsed argument that women in particular are cultural dupes who are easily seduced and brainwashed. Her answer also resonates with the notion of 'role modelling', which is often used in public discourses around television—that is, the idea that young people identify with glamorous media characters or personalities and are therefore led to copy their behaviour or develop what researchers deem to be 'unrealistic' expectations or attitudes about real life (Buckingham and Bragg 2004, p. 10). This, however, was contradicted by one of our youngest audience members, Lena, an 18 year-old service worker from Munich:

Anne: Do you get inspired to become a model when you see this [Top Model]?
Lena: No.
Anne: And do you think it is likely that your friends would get inspired when they are watching Top Model and maybe think about becoming a Top Model too?
Lena: No.
Anne: But do you think other young women might get this idea?
Lena: Yes—absolutely!
Anne: Really?
Lena: Yes, especially if they are slim, like the models, then I think they say 'ha, I could do this too'… and so it goes.

So was Judith wrong in her assumption about television and young women's aspirations? As a young, working-class woman from a low educational background, Lena is precisely the type of audience that is often constructed as gullible. But neither Lena nor, she claims, her friends are buying into the idea that a career as a model is available to them. This is not to suggest that audiences never buy into ideas that circulate on television. However, it is to suggest that this 'buying into' may relate not so much to the content of the media (their 'message') as to how they invite us to engage in discussions regarding personal lives. Interestingly enough, Lena uses the same strategy as Judith to construct herself as the knowing viewer and others as gullible. This echoes research in audience studies that suggests that media effects typically involve a form of displacement in which it is always "other people who are seen to be more vulnerable to influence than oneself" (Buckingham and Bragg 2004, p. 125). Children and young people are the most obvious target of this form of displacement. The interview with Lena shows that young people also seek to displace the effects of the media onto others. Thus, the gullible is always located somewhere else, away from the self. Participants from all social and educational backgrounds used the content they identified as offensive as a tool to make a distinction between them and the rest of the audience.

The Porous Border Between 'Us' and 'Them'

This rhetorical and affective positioning of the self as superior to the imagined 'other' was clearly present throughout our work on this project, as almost all our participants separated the television audience into two categories: the self-reflective individual viewer and the homogenous, uncritical 'mass audience':

> Well, I think there are mainly two categories of viewers: the first category realizes that this television programme is absolute rubbish, but when she comes home in the evening and has worked for ten hours, then she lets this go and maybe finds it also a bit amusing then. And then there is apparently this other group of viewers who can identify with these programmes and maybe find this REALLY entertaining... (Heidi, social worker, Berlin)

Heidi does not deny that people from all groups might watch inappropriate programmes yet the difference is in the intensity of the viewing pleasure: some find it "a bit amusing" whereas others:find this REALLY entertaining". This boundary between those who are strongly affected and those who are barely affected, was carefully constructed and policed throughout our interviews, but there were instances where cracks showed. For example, even though people from all social backgrounds and ages insisted that they were not the viewers of these offensive programmes (or if so only from an ironic stance, 'switching off their brains'), they were often highly familiar with these programmes, including episode-by-episode narratives known by heart. In a focus group consisting of white, working-class participants, Pam distanced herself from others thus:

> People who are unemployed, who seriously sit around drinking all day. They're the sort to watch Jeremy Kyle [it becomes evident later that Pam herself is a devoted Jeremy Kyle viewer]. I think just that class of people. I think they just make that class of people worse.

Pam admitted over the course of our interview that she actually knew some of the episodes by heart, including names of characters, who divorced whom and who cheated with whom and when. This might suggest that some of our participants were more interested in programmes that they deemed inappropriate than they were prepared to admit, at least in the context of the interview situation. This striking co-existence of avid viewership of programmes with a simultaneous disdain, scorn and openly hostile attitude towards intended audiences of the programmes was one of the most striking findings in the course of our fieldwork. Furthermore, people often presented an ambiguous relationship with programmes that they identified as a 'tasteless' and therefore offensive. To illustrate this point we refer here to two of the richest examples we came across in our fieldwork in Germany:

> (We are watching a scene of the dating show Schwer Verliebt [Deeply in Love]. In this scene both severely overweight participants are stripped down to their underwear and nervously awaiting a full-body massage. To break the silence, the woman makes fun of the man's underwear, telling him it is unflattering to his figure.)

> Matthias: *Grins and leans in.*

Anne: Why did you smile when the clip of Schwer Verliebt came on?

Matthias: For one thing, because I once had a girlfriend who also didn't like my underwear. And secondly because… I don't want to express myself too harshly here… because it show two uneducated people, how they try to communicate with each other. And that's funny. Because it's basically two idiots on TV who open up their privacy, standing there in their underwear, which is private, on TV. I guess that's typical of Hartz-IV television … that makes the appeal of these shows.

The interview with Matthias is interesting because it shows the ambiguity at work when people watch 'offensive' programmes. On the one hand, Matthias identified this show as 'Hartz-IV television' (Television for the recipients of state benefits) and therefore implicitly as a programme he should not watch, let alone get pleasure out of. And yet Matthias seemed to enjoy it and smiled. When asked about this affective reaction, he justified it in two ways: firstly, by highlighting a similarity between himself and the man on the screen ("I once had a girlfriend who also didn't like my underwear"). He then detached himself and analysed how humour is evoked here (the transgression of boundaries: "I guess that is typical for Hartz-IV television …. that makes the appeal of these shows"). It could be argued that Matthias's reaction, his smile, helps to create zones of safety around the 'abject' object by stepping back and distancing himself from it. In and through this gesture, it could be argued, the images and the protagonists are 'othered'. Yet, his reactions reveal more: he leaned in and smiled, which made him, at least momentarily, affectively part of 'the intended audience'. He watched it, he got in the mood and even enjoyed it (however we would explain his enjoyment as classed derision or a moment of looking through). Eventually, Matthias realizes how porous the boundary has become, and he works to reinstall it. He does so through self-reflexivity and through a detached analysis of the scene, which allows him to produce himself as a controlled, reasonable viewer who can deconstruct representations through reason rather than being 'uncontrollably' emotionally moved. This differentiates him from members of the 'intended' audience, who are imagined as too passive and ignorant to distance themselves from these representations and as simply 'buying into' any programme presented to them, seemingly without further reflection.

Another example of the porous border between 'us' and 'them', is from social worker Heidi, who acknowledged that she enjoyed some of the so-called 'Hartz-IV' programmes:

> Hm… actually I can sometimes enjoy these so-called Hartz-IV TV shows… this is not an expression that comes from me… that's what it's called in the media, and funnily enough even by the people I work with [people who depend on benefits], they are calling it that too… I can enjoy them because I have such a distance from these programmes that they can't offend me, I can't take them seriously. But I'm sure people exist who really enjoy them and find them entertaining… But then, to be honest, I found this part with the people in underwear also quite entertaining. What's it called again? I think this is something I would watch.

Throughout this, Heidi, as a member of the middle classes, slips in and out of the audience for 'Hartz-IV' television. She realizes how problematic and unstable the audience group is, even as she tries to construct herself against it. She begins by justifying her word choice, 'Hartz-IV' as a label for certain TV shows. Aware of the degrading and classist connotations that this term contains, she calls on the media and even Hartz-IV recipients themselves to legitimise her use of the word. After this, Heidi admits to enjoying these programmes herself sometimes, because they seem absurd to her. It could be implied that her response is to some extent invited by the genre. Shattuc (1997) suggests that many day-time television shows have a strong element of 'camp', particularly in their theatricality and their use of ritual and humour. Thus, they address an ironic, 'playful' viewer, who refuses to take them completely seriously. Heidi identifies her viewing of these shows as very sporadic, while highlighting that she cannot *really* be moved by them, either pleasurably nor negatively in the form of offence, but that there are people *who really enjoy them and find them entertaining.* Similarly to Matthias in the prior example, this functions to produce herself as the detached viewer in opposition to those who are moved by the programme. And yet Heidi admits that she also really enjoys some of these sorts of programmes (especially when they revolve around romance and relationships), even though she does not know the name of these shows, which, in turn, signals to us that she is not an avid viewer. What does this zig-zagging tell us about how Heidi positions herself? Both Matthias's and especially Heidi's account show that othering fellow viewers because of their

arguable viewing pleasure became messy when our interviewees realized they were part of this themselves: the border between 'us' and 'them', those mindless, vulnerable and gullible others, is porous when we realize that the affective forces of 'offensive' television become alluring and titillating for us too.

This affective ambiguity of 'offence' can be explained through Julia Kristeva's notion of 'abjection'. Abjection is a 'twisted braid of affects' (1982, p. 1) where that was is experienced as repugnant (and needs to be expelled from one's body or its proximity) similutaneously fascinates, arrests attention, and refuses to go away. Hence, the abject is an issue of affective intensity and affective ambiguity—something that oscillates between excitement and disgust, joy and repulsion, because it "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1982, p. 4). What disgusts also excites and attracts, and the oscillation between the two affective modes explains much of offensive television's appeal. We are not suggesting that all affective reactions follow this pattern, but accounting for the ambiguous affective nature of 'offensive' television programmes allows us to better understand the movement between connection and disassociation through which people make sense of 'offensive' television content. These moments of joy, excitement and entertainment that we found in our participants talk do not only create boundaries but such modes of engagement legitimise the viewing of a programme that may otherwise be deemed as inappropriate. In speaking of their entertainment, viewers embraced the 'offensive' material that they had split off at the same time. In the interview situation, they could at once articulate being offended and different from the offensive content, while at the same time justifying their continued consumption to us by evoking light-hearted motives around entertainment (see also Johanssen, forthcoming). Moments like these illusrated to us how unstable and porous the boundaries between imagined audiences are.

Offence and Consumer Choice

Many participants had a clear explanation for why these offensive television shows that indoctrinate others (but not them) are shown on television: because 'they'—that is, the uncritical masses—want to see them. A key figure in these discussions is 'the housewife' who passively consumes daytime television, thereby negatively influencing what is produced for and distributed through television. As Egon explained, "All this gets

produced in the first place because the masses want to see this. The housewife who is at home at noon for her ironing, she wants to see this". Or, as Ed had remarked earlier, there was "the mother sitting at home all day" watching "filthy crap" and not being a "role model". And Tina noted:

> I'm always astonished, because everyone says, oh my God, how horrible. But these shows have been on for many years, and I always think, if everyone says they're shit, then why are they still here? Hmm… normally that's a question of audience rating or not?

These responses resonate with public discourses in which the 'mass audience' is constructed by audiences themselves as homogenous, uncritical, easily influenced and often feminized. It is not surprising, then, that our participants, who wanted to produce themselves as self-reflective 'subjects of value', were quick to distance themselves from the imagined others who are, through their viewing preferences, responsible for such 'bad' television content.

In this section, we aim to tease out some of the implications of such an understanding. What does it mean when the ubiquity of provocative television content comes to be explained as the result of supply and demand? We argue that strategies of displacement ('offensive programmes exist because mindless masses want to see them') reinforce the neoliberal idea of the audience member as a sovereign consumer who determines through individual choice what type of television programmes are produced and distributed in society. This emphasis on individual consumer choice misinterprets commercial television industries, and the content generate, as 'democratic' rather than oligarchic. 'Offensive' television content is therefore often viewed as merely the outcome of bad consumer choices by the masses, rather than as produced by powerful actors and institutions within the media industries who determine far in advance of individual consumer choice which programmes will get produced, bought in from other countries, or distributed. Displacing responsibility on to the 'ignorant' audience consumer obfuscates how these programmes are also a response to an economic restructuring within society and the television industry more specifically: from the mid 80s onwards, we can see, through the force of neoliberalism, an increasing deregulation of the media industry. Producers responded to the explosion of cable channels and the concomitant fragmentation of audiences

by introducing cheaply produced formats such as reality television that drove down production inputs and professional labour costs (Ross 2014). By using non-traditional labour for story development, writing, performing and camerawork, as well as production inputs such as sets, props and costumes, these shows not only reflect 'lower taste', but also allow for lower production costs and profit for the cable networks. Thus, the fact that so-called infotainment, reality-based television, tabloid TV, crime-time television, trash TV and on-scene shows persist on television is not only a result of viewer taste and demand, but a much wider structural phenomenon. It is the economically based response to an industry with increasing competition not only from other channels but also from online media. Many media scholars argue that economically speaking low-brow television programmes such as reality television and talk shows are an outgrowth of both the rapid development of new media technologies and a changing industrial context characterised by deregulation, increasing competition and financial scarcity (see for instance Holt 2011; Kavka 2012; Ross 2014). Thus, understanding consumer choice as the primary cause of a TV programme's social existence leads to a damaging displacement of responsibility in terms of media content production, especially when speaking about private broadcasters, who are often framed as simply reflecting consumer demand in order to attract advertisers.

This orthodoxy concerning the power of consumer choice is also the reason why programmes on public broadcasting services are sometimes experienced as offensive: even though many of our participants articulated high expectations of public service broadcasters and their role in public life (something we discuss later), these programmes were often discussed in a dismissive, denigrating tone because they are not the result of their individual choice as consumers, but produced with public funding. Ivan, a 43 year old Russian engineer who is—as he tell us—often upset by the German bureaucracy in his everyday life, expressed his frustration with public broadcasting and the programmes they show:

> That makes me really go nuts. Recently I am wondering what this licence that I pay for is actually good for. I basically pay money to become dumber and dumber through these television programmes. Why do I do this? I really don't want to pay GEZ [abbreviation for the "Gebühreneinzugszentrale" eng. the fee collection center of public broadcasting institutions in Germany] any more, it really makes me sick what they show…

When probed further about what exactly it is that make him "sick", he expresses his dissatisfaction with the news reporting on public broadcasters. In his opinion, this kind of news reporting is biased and pro-USA. Therefore, so he tell us, he is often forced to 'find' news himself online. Ivan's answer resonates with wider discussions in Germany about a Lügenpresse (lying press) that misleads the public on purpose. And yet, his comment also illustrate how strongly audiences feel about their freedom to choose the media content they want to consume, especially in times where the trust in public broadcasters is diminishing. Online, Ivan finds news that appears authentic to him (often provided on video blogs by citizen journalists) and that reconfirms his view on political events. Thus, the potential to feel offended is much lower here.

Egon from Berlin is equally irritated by the television programme provided by the public service broadcasters:

> All these public broadcasters, and you even pay for them, they never ask 'what do you want to see?' And what really angers me is that every state has his own channel too. And then this channel has another sub-channel. You have RBB Berlin, RBB Brandenburg, and then god knows… but in the end they all bring the same. The only difference is that they might mention something more regional in the news. And to spend all our money on this? I really don't see the point.

Egon's comment highlights the importance of consumer choice in questions of offence. He is angered because "they [PSB] never ask 'what do you want to see?'" Rather than diversity, which would allow him to choose amongst the different television programmes, Egon argues that they all bring the same content. As becomes apparent, in these accounts it is not so-called gullible, tasteless others who are seen as limiting choice for our participants, but the top-down model of public funding (the GEZ fee) that is seen as hindering choice. Rather than recognizing public funding as a necessary prerequisite for the role of public broadcasting services in public life, some of our participants made the lack of consumer choice their vehicle in turning against public broadcasting services. Thus, whether or not a programme is (perceived to be) a function of consumer choice becomes an easily employed device through which people distinguish between and judge television content.

The ways in which consumer choice influences *when* and *why* we take offence seems logical when read against the backdrop of commercialization

of the media and neoliberalism. And yet, like any myth, they allow curious paradoxes to exist. For example, in our study, most people agreed that valuable, educational television content is produced and distributed on public broadcasting services, yet they did not want to pay for it to be there. The imbrication of consumer choice and offence is also very important to explore at a time when new generations have more opportunities to avoid public service broadcasters entirely, or when doubts about public service television have been further deepened by concerns about the sustainability of public funding, particularly in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 and in austerity regimes (Steemers 2015, p. 75).

Conclusions

In this chapter, we aimed to explore what audience *do* with television content they find offensive. As we have shown, audience members we spoke to almost always adopted a critical position, distancing themselves from the 'rest of the audiences' in society, who were always less sophisticated than them. A large amount of time was spent discussing the 'real' (intended) audiences of programmes, especially those involving public displays of the private (e.g., The Jeremy Kyle Show, Schwer Verliebt). Audiences stressed time and again that they were not the intended audiences of these shows, which offended them, and that there were these unknown other vulnerable, ill-informed, and even tasteless audiences, for whom these programmes were intended. This othering of fellow viewers often revealed a dichotomy between people's high levels of familiarity with these programmes, including episode-by-episode narratives known by heart, and an insistence on the fact that they were not the viewers of these programmes. These—so the argument went—were really meant for others who, depending on the context, were discussed as either tasteless or vulnerable, or both. Our fieldwork revealed that audiences use strategies of displacement to construct themselves as subjects of value often excluding or vilifying the 'other'. As we have shown, this form of 'othering' fellow viewers is so prevalent that nearly all those we spoke to engaged in them. No matter what your social or embodied position, the ill-informed, vulnerable other is always located somewhere else. Even though this distinction between 'us' and 'them' is culturally constructed and scrambled through the affective movement of connections and disassociation through which audiences make sense of television, we

demonstrated that audience members work hard to ultimately reinstall the boundary.

We found that these forms of othering enabled our interviewees to construct themselves as 'subjects of value', which is crucial in neoliberal times when the self is constantly developing and improving itself through the 'right' kind of consumption. Offensive television programmes (be these in the form of day-time talk shows, sensationalist news reports or depictions of violence) are therefore the choice of the 'other', but not of the self. We found, further, that strategies of displacement function to displace responsibility for media production away from media instructions and regulators to the individual. When the apparent ubiquity of provocative television content comes to be explained as the result of consumer choice ('These programmes are produced and distributed because people like *this*—that is the masses—want to see it!'), any informed critique of the political economy of the media, and even minimal opportunities for economically marginalized groups to communicate their experiences and identities within mainstream television, are prevented. It is noteworthy that strategies of displacement not only misread the workings of the commercial television channels, but also have a damaging effect on public broadcasters. This is because strategies of displacement that create subjects of value do not challenge, but ultimately reinforce the importance of consumer choice. Rather than understanding public funding as one way in which plurality and diversity can be sustained, the subject of value experiences these programmes as infuriating, as they are not the result of his/her choice but of some un-transparent, state-ordered, top-down system. This, as we have shown, upsets many audience members, who understand their freedom to consume as a fundamental marker of their viewing pleasure.

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