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Soap Operas and Artistic Legitimation: The Role of Critical Commentary

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This article explores the artistic legitimization process of U.S. daytime soap operas through analysis of commentary published in The New York Times from 1930 to 2010. While soap operas gained economic legitimacy over time (due to profit-earning potential) and were popular with audiences, they were never widely classified as an “art” form. Through examination of 3 aspects of The New York Times articles—tone of critical commentary, viewership of critical commentary, and themes of critical commentary—we explore the role of evaluative press coverage in the validation, or lack thereof, of the soap opera form. Implications for the decline of the genre are also discussed.

Keywords: Critics, Reviews, Soap Opera, Television, Artistic Legitimation.

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Serialized narratives anchored radio and television daytime broadcasting in the United States through most of the 20th century, but the genre has declined from a high of 18 network soaps airing in 1969 to four as of this writing. Analysts point to a range of exogenous factors to explain soaps’ waning, including their core female audience entering paid labor in the 1970s and 1980s, expanding entertainment options, consumer lifestyle changes that disadvantage daily viewing habits, prime-time’s successful adaptation of serialized storytelling, and the cumulative effects of the 1988 Writers Guild of America strike (which lead to shabby storytelling), the mid-1990s O. J. Simpson trial (which dominated daytime airwaves for months), and the 2000s trend in reality and lifestyle programming (Ford, De Kosnik, & Harrington, 2011). An alternate scholarly approach focuses on endogenous factors, suggesting that market saturation was the culprit; the genre’s very success prevented evolution

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of the storytelling form (Lippmann, Scardaville, & Harrington, n.d.). Despite soaps' decline the genre is not dead—new platforms and business models are emerging (e.g., the success of the subscription-based web-only series *Venice: The Series*), the four remaining broadcast soaps are faring well in the ratings (Consoli, 2014), and soap fandom remains vibrant, particularly online. The story of soap opera thus continues to unfold.

An analysis of the genre's trajectory since its emergence on radio in 1930¹ (Scardaville, 2009, 2011a) points to the partial success of the soap opera form, namely its achievement of *economic* legitimacy by being a highly profitable commercial product but its ultimate failure to achieve *artistic* legitimacy in that soaps were never widely accepted as works of art. In other words, soaps were successful in an economic context (profit-making potential), successful in an entertainment context (popular with audiences), but unsuccessful in an artistic context (not classified as art).² On one hand this appears obvious—"everyone knows" that soap opera is not "art"—but since organizational theories hold that organizational survival and success ultimately depend on legitimacy (Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006, p. 54), it matters to the fate of the daytime soap opera that only partial legitimacy was achieved. The study presented here explores one aspect of the artistic legitimation process for soap operas—the role played by evaluative commentary—through analysis of articles published in *The New York Times* between 1930 and 2010.

Critical commentary and the legitimation process

Cultural sociologists emphasize that artistic legitimation is a social process, not a singular event (Becker, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987). Legitimation occurs through "a collective construction of social reality in which the elements of a social order are seen as consonant with norms, values, and beliefs that individuals presume are widely shared, whether or not they personally share them" (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 55). Any cultural product—a song, book, film, or television show—has the potential to be named, accepted, and maintained as art. We are more familiar with the success stories (e.g., Shakespeare, jazz, and film) than with the relative failures (e.g., vaudeville, Prancercise, and Thomas Kinkade), although the latter offer valuable insight into the lifespan or biographies of cultural forms. Scholars propose a four-stage model by which an object gains legitimacy—innovation, local validation, diffusion, and general validation—and agree that what succeeds at a local level might not more generally (Baumann, 2007; Johnson et al., 2006). This is indeed what happened with soap opera; the genre received local artistic legitimacy among select groups (such as soap fans and producers) but not widespread validation among the general public (Scardaville, 2011a).

Multiple factors can help confer artistic worth on an object, including dedicated awards ceremonies, suggestion of social or political relevance, serious treatment within academia, or the status of its patronage. High-status patrons have a direct

effect on increasing a cultural product's legitimacy (Baumann, 2001; DiMaggio, 1982), and the association between soap opera and femininity/females (in narrative structure, target audience, and actual audience; Allen, 1985) marked it from the beginning as a suspect cultural form. Indeed, early press coverage of radio serials focused on their "cheap" and "detrimental" effects on children and housewives who were believed incapable of understanding soap stories as fictional ("Radio is attacked," 1937). This presumption of the soap audience as deviant consumers persisted until the women's movement of the late 1970s, at which time feminist scholars began to reexamine soaps as an integral part of women's culture, arguing for the sociocultural value of melodramatic fiction focusing on romance and domesticity, debating the counterhegemonic potential of oppositional readings, and examining the range of pleasures that women derive from soap viewing (Hobson, 1982; Lopate, 1976; Modleski, 1982). However, this potentially legitimizing feminist discourse, while an important marker in the evolution of the genre, was ultimately unable to counter the longstanding association of soap viewership with female deviance (Scardaville, 2011a).

Our particular interest in the artistic legitimization process is the role played by critical commentary and reviews published in *The New York Times*.³ In general, reviews can take many different forms and include multiple elements such as description, analysis, entertainment, instruction, and evaluation (Shrum, 1991, p. 352), but most importantly they offer summary and evaluative information to audiences and potential corporate sponsors.⁴ As Blank (2007) puts it, reviews answer very basic questions about a cultural object: "What is it?" and "Is it any good?" (p. 7). There are two types of formal reviews, whether of restaurants, computers, or Broadway musicals: connoisseurial reviews (which are typically authored and draw on the unique talent of the reviewer) and procedural reviews (which rely on rankings of groups of products and are comparatively impersonal). These two types follow different logics, focus on different texts, are created by different organizations, and are read differently by audiences (Blank, 2007, p. 28). In elite art worlds such as the theater, opera, or ballet, critical reviews are typically connoisseurial and are crucial for legitimizing which objects are worthy of esthetic praise and public attention.⁵ In nonelite art worlds such as television, reviews are both connoisseurial and procedural and serve a legitimization purpose as well, though this function is problematized due to "commercial considerations, audience expertise, and the need to find a balance between art and entertainment" (Bielby, 2011a, p. 525).⁶ Most importantly for our purposes, critical commentary of both types can help objects bridge the gap from nonelite to elite status. In the context of film, for example, Baumann (2001) reveals how events happening in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly an intellectualizing discourse mobilized by film critics, helped shift film from "entertainment" to "art." Similarly, Corse and Griffin (1997) demonstrate how changes in the context of book reviewing, along with changes in the contexts of publishing and academia, facilitated a novel's initial lukewarm reception into membership in the literary canon.

Critical commentary, television, and soap opera

Newspapers have been the main avenue for learning about TV programs since the mid-1950s, with most early reviewers holding experience in theater criticism. Institutionalized in 1978 with the founding of the Television Critics Association, TV critics' main role today is to evaluate programs for audiences (echoing the core mediating role in elite art worlds) and advocate for audiences in their search for entertainment, although industry members also find them useful for predicting success. Over time TV critics' role has expanded to include industry events more broadly and they now hold a dual role of reporter and critic, addressing hard industry news as well as the soft news of gossip/celebrity. An analysis of 540 reviews from 15 different critics at six different newspapers finds that critics draw on a core set of criteria in their work: "appraisal of formal aesthetic elements, signaling increased attention to television as an art form, while retaining a consideration of factors such as entertainment value that are of interest to audiences and business constituencies alike" (Bielby, Moloney, & Ngo, 2005, p. 2). Other work explores the role of critical commentary in the global TV syndication market, finding that there too "product appraisals consist of rational, concrete criteria that signal profitability alongside aesthetic criteria that reflect dimensions of entertainment" (Bielby, 2011a, p. 525). Given the relative absence of global counterparts to U.S. domestic television critics, the role of domestic reviewers is crucial to transnationalized culture industries.

Although soap operas were one of television's earliest forms of programming, "far less is known about the origin, role and status of daytime television critics" compared with critics of primetime television, film, music, and theater (Bielby, 2011b, p. 251). Even the TV industry itself has given only perfunctory attention to soap opera as an art form, due to:

[. . .] longstanding beliefs that its audience was not sophisticated enough to appreciate critical assessment; that the genre was not authentically complex enough to be subjected to critical appraisal; that there was no need for critics or their criticism since the audience was already firmly attached to the medium and would watch regardless of esthetic evaluation [. . .] and that the audience itself was so dedicated and knowledgeable because of avid viewing that it managed to serve ably as its own critic. (p. 253)

Despite industry inattention, formal criticism dates back to soaps' emergence on radio in the 1930s and expanded rapidly in the 1960s. A major shift occurred in 1968 when *TV Guide* started publishing features on the genre (LaGuardia, 1974), and again in 1970 with the launch of the first dedicated soap magazine, *Daytime TV*. At the height of soaps' popularity from the 1970s to the 1990s, at least a dozen soap magazines were in production at any one time—no other media sphere supported so many specialized publications (Harrington & Bielby, 1995). Magazines such as *Soap Opera Digest* serve similar functions as other mass circulation publications—offering connoisseurial reviews, covering gossip/celebrity news, and exploring industry/economic

issues—but they also serve an advocacy function for the daytime industry, downplaying salacious gossip, and operating under a “reciprocal tendency to not offend anyone” (p. 78).

Compared with critics of other cultural objects, soap critics face a unique challenge: how to “evaluate a narrative that ha[s] no readily apparent beginning, middle, and end, or a format that specialize[s] in multiple and interwoven stories and emphasize[s] characterization over plot” (Bielby, 2011b, p. 252). Soap critics themselves understand their work as more specialized than that in other entertainment realms, requiring an understanding of soap history, knowledge that soaps must be interpreted differently than other cultural objects, and attunement to the emotional authenticity of storytelling to fans’ engagement with the genre. As soaps began their downward slide in the 1990s, critics and fans employed different logics to interpret the decline. Soap critics prioritized economic logic (e.g., changing audience demographics and increased competition from other entertainment sources), whereas fans prioritized esthetic logic (e.g., changes in writing quality and production values; Scardaville, 2011b). While each group acknowledged the importance of both logics, professionals believed economic changes resulted in esthetic changes whereas fans upheld the reverse causal trajectory. Both groups agreed that both quality and ratings of TV soaps suffered in the 1990s and 2000s.

Rather than focus on evaluative commentary in the dedicated soap press, we explore commentary as published in *The New York Times*. The *Times* is an advantageous data source: (a) it was founded in 1851, thus spanning the entire 80+ year history of radio and television soap opera; (b) New York was the center of early radio distribution and expansion, and along with Los Angeles became one of the primary centers of TV soap production; (c) by 1940 the *Times* was the dominant newspaper in New York City (Jacobs, 2000); (d) the *Times* has evolved into an elite newspaper with a national and international reach and impact (2000); and (e) readers assume that “reviewers for major publications are qualified professionals” who are accurate in their assessments (Blank, 2007). Given these factors, commentary as published in the *Times* has had perhaps unique potential to influence the soap opera legitimization process over time.

Coverage of radio and televised serials in *The New York Times* (hereafter NYT) dates back to 1934 and includes formal evaluative reviews as well as economic and industry (hard) news, gossip/celebrity (soft) news, profiles of industry members, obituaries of soap insiders, and coverage of ancillary events such as celebrity softball tournaments. A key difference between the NYT and the dedicated soap press is that the former does not function as an advocate for the soap genre. Early NYT reportage is delightful to revisit in its usage of colorful, now-dated language. For example, radio serials were described as “hoary,” “dolorous,” and “turgid,” the listening experience as “lachrymose,” and the narrative focus on domestic life as “flapdoodle.” Later reportage is notable for its invocation of the term “soap opera” to refer to any variety of events, revealing the extent to which the (presumed over-the-top melodramatic) meaning of soaps has entered the national imagination. In 1993 alone the following

were described as soap-opera-ish in the *NYT*: the British royal family, Arizona's policy on Martin Luther King Day, the Weather Channel, Israeli-Arab relations, San Francisco politics, the Nigerian government, a prominent New York family, the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan ice skating scandal, and Cuba under Castro. What have we come to learn about soap opera through the *NYT*? More precisely, how might evaluative coverage of soaps in the *NYT* have impacted the genre's artistic legitimization process? And finally, while this is *not* a study of audiences, what role might *NYT* commentary has played in the decline of the genre?

Data and methods

Our data are a subset of that collected for a larger project, which explored both economic and artistic legitimacies in the U.S. daytime soap opera form and was guided by two questions: "What factors promoted the economic legitimacy of the soap opera in the United States?" and "What factors enabled and constrained the diffusion of a legitimating ideology for U.S. daytime soap operas?" (Scardaville, 2011a, p. 6). Multiple methodologies were used to examine these questions. To address the first question, the author constructed a data set of all radio and television daytime soaps airing in the United States from 1930 to 2010 and employed regression analysis to test a series of hypotheses regarding soap opera foundings (the launch of new programs), organizational density (the number of soap operas on the air), and economic viability. The analysis revealed basic patterns and relationships of these variables across time. To address the second question, the author used textual analysis to examine a subsample of articles about soap operas that appeared in the *NYT* from 1930–2010, comparing and contrasting themes to develop a thesis about the creation and maintenance of a legitimating ideology for daytime soap operas.

Our current project, a new and separate analysis, expands upon this prior work by: (a) exploring *tone* (rather than *theme*) in *NYT* press coverage over time, (b) utilizing a different subsample for purposes of analysis (i.e., those articles with explicit evaluative commentary on the genre), and (c) using a different method: content analysis. Content analysis is useful for documenting trends over long time periods such as the 80-year period under consideration here. Its limitation as a descriptive method is overcome in this project by illustrative engagement with *NYT* commentary and by drawing upon the (previously unpublished) thematic findings from the larger project described above. While textual analysis has its own limitations in the context of television studies (Creeber, 2006), content and textual analyses in combination provide reliable and nuanced understandings of the role of critical commentary in the esthetic legitimization process of soap opera.

The sample for the larger project was assembled through a search for the terms "daytime serial," "radio serial,"⁷ and "soap opera" in *The New York Times* Historical Database (1930–2003) and *The New York Times* Database (2004–2010), which yielded 12,248 articles. From this collection of articles (i.e., for the project presented here), a team of research assistants selected those articles that had some review or

critical (evaluative) content pertaining to daytime soap operas in the United States ($n = 762$ articles). The majority of articles yielded in the initial search came from later years of the coverage period and used “soap opera” as a descriptor of other cultural forms, sporting or political events, or other topics tangential to our study. Other examples that were discarded included TV schedules for a particular week or obituaries of soap actors that contained no critical content. A smaller number of articles were simply about soap or operas. Those that remained were either about individual soap operas, the soap genre, audience, or industry, or more general discussions of television or other media with some portion of the article devoted to an evaluation of soap opera.

After our dataset was finalized, research assistants coded each article on three dimensions relevant to the artistic legitimization process of soaps: (a) the tone of the article (hereafter “tone”), (b) whether the article was explicitly authored (“authored”), and (c) whether the author watched the soap opera (“viewed”). Tone is important given the potential role of journalists as tastemakers and the associated potential of evaluative commentary to influence readers’ consumption decisions (Shrum, 1991, p. 353). Authored and viewed are important in that connoisseurial evaluations rest on the singular experience and talent of the author and are understood to be *personal* responses to a cultural object. As such, they speak to author credibility (Blank, 2007). For the *tone* variable, the research assistants used a 5-point scale adapted from Shrum (1991) to code the articles, which ranged from very negative to very positive. For the *authored* variable, they identified whether or not the article had a byline. For the *viewed* variable, they determined whether or not the author of the article actually listened to/watched the program(s) under consideration. The remaining values and coding criteria are found in Table 1.

To determine interrater reliability, the research assistants were divided into two teams that each coded an initial subset of 10 articles and a follow-up set of 10 articles. We used these articles to calculate Krippendorff’s Alpha, a commonly used measure of reliability that has the added advantage of allowing for multiple coders, multiple variables, and multiple values for each variable (Krippendorff, 2004). Krippendorff’s Alpha is a sophisticated coefficient and a recognized standard in content analysis research due to its methodological rigor. It adjusts for small sample bias, missing data, and chance agreement, which increases the probability that the coefficient is a measure of true agreement, not artificially inflated. Discussing and clarifying the codes and their application yielded final interrater reliability scores of .814 and .895, which are above the standard of .8 for this test. Research assistants then coded the remainder of the articles in the dataset, with weekly meetings to discuss troublesome articles and other coding issues.

Results

Table 2 shows the summary statistics for the dataset. A total of 684 (90%) of the articles were explicitly authored and 78 (10%) were not.⁸ Of the 762 articles included in our

Table 1 Coding Scheme for *The New York Times* Soap Opera Articles

Tone of review?	Very negative
	a Virtually all negative phrases/statements
	b Reviewer clearly dislikes show/genre/actor/acting/storyline
	c Positive aspects unmentioned or minor
	d Reviewer advises against watching (without qualification)
	Somewhat negative
	a Negative statements dominate positive ones either by emphasis, placement (first or last), or quantity (more negative statements than positive ones)
	b Mainly descriptive but some negative phrases
	Neutral
	a Descriptive (no evaluation or statements) OR
	b Equal emphasis on positive or negative aspects
	c Cannot tell whether reviewer endorses show/genre/actor/acting/storyline
	Somewhat positive
	a Positive statements dominate negative ones either by emphasis, placement (first or last), or quantity (more positive statements than negative ones)
	b Mainly descriptive but some positive phrases
	Very positive
	a Virtually all positive phrases/statements
	b Reviewer clearly dislikes show/genre/actor/acting/ storyline
	c Negative aspects unmentioned or minor
	d Reviewer advises watching without qualification
Reviewer a viewer?	Explicit reference
	The reviewer made explicit references to watching soap opera (“When I sat down to watch ...”).
	Evidence for viewership
	There is convincing evidence that the reviewer watched the soap opera (e.g., specific references to scenes, plot, or dialogue).
	No evidence
	There is no explicit reference or evidence that the reviewer watched the soap opera.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Soap Opera Article Dataset

Authorship	<i>N</i>
Review explicitly authored	684
No author mentioned	78
Reviewer viewership	
Explicit reference to viewing	35
Evidence of viewing	191
No evidence of or reference to viewing	536
<i>(N</i> = 762 articles)	
Tone of review	
Mean:	3.049
Standard deviation:	0.406

analysis, 35 (5%) contained explicit reference by the reviewer to actually watching the soap being discussed, 191 (25%) contained sufficient evidence that the author watched the soap, and the remaining 536 (70%) contained no evidence (explicit or implicit) that the author watched the soap opera(s) under consideration. For the tone variable, the mean rating for the 762 articles in our dataset was 3.049, with a standard deviation of .406. Overall, the articles were relatively balanced between positive and negative over the period under investigation.

Our discussion below proceeds in two stages, with the first stage focusing on the tone of the articles and the second stage focused on authorship/viewership of articles.

Article tone

In Figure 1, we plot the average tone of the articles from 1930–2010. We use 3-year moving averages to allow for easier observation of longer-term trends. At the same time, this time-frame keeps important shorter-term trends more evident than would a longer-term moving average.

As noted above, commentary over the time period in question was balanced overall, indicating a neutral or slightly positive treatment of soap opera by *NYT* journalists. Articles were more positive in later decades, with a mean rating of 2.79 for 1930–1969 and 3.08 for 1970–2010 (significant at $< .001$ level). In terms of the artistic legitimization process and in the context of the *NYT*'s longtime status as a reputable national news outlet, these articles seemingly functioned to aid (or at least not harm) soaps' bid for artistic legitimization. Initially, this counters our expectations; however, some of the data spikes reveal a more nuanced story than the overall trend suggests. For example, we note a negative spike in the late 1940s/early 1950s when soap opera transitioned to television,⁹ followed by an upward spike in the mid-1950s when the economic viability of that transition became apparent to journalists.¹⁰ The tone of articles is positive around 1970 when the most soaps ever were broadcast ($n = 18$ in 1969) and the first dedicated soap magazine debuted (*Daytime TV* in 1970), but lower a decade later when broadcast minutes peaked for soaps ($n = 168,000$ minutes in 1981) and the

Figure 1 Average Tone of the Articles From 1930–2010.

genre had its highest-rated episode ever (*General Hospital* in 1981). The sharp dip in the mid-1990s corresponds to the months-long preemption of soap opera for the O. J. Simpson trial, but the upward trend in the mid-2000s (one of the most positive overall) is counterintuitive in predating a wave of soap cancelations.¹¹ What might we make of these contradictions vis-à-vis other corresponding industry events—and vis-à-vis the artistic legitimization process?

Earlier research (Scardaville, 2011a) helps shed light on these findings in its focus on *thematic* coverage of serials in the *NYT* rather than positive or negative *tone* of coverage. This research found that very early reporting on radio serials was mainly informative, alerting readers to the development of new programs or changes to the broadcast schedule. The first evaluative (and positive) commentary appeared in 1934 and discussed elements of successful serials:

Study of the “long run” broadcasts reveals twelve ingredients, at least one of which is found in the [successful radio serial]—naturalness, voice personality, friendliness, timeliness, diversity, suspense, drama, education, melody, individuality, quality and humor. (Dunlap, 1934)

Commentary turned increasingly evaluative by the late 1930s as reviewers deliberated the place and function of radio serials alongside other art forms such as theater and literature. One article quotes soap creator Frank Hummert explaining radio serials’ distinctiveness:

[Radio] characters, according to Mr. Hummert, must be human and lovable, their actions must be logical, consistent and believable, and painted against the canvas of simple, everyday American life [. . .] “The theatre and the theatre of the air [as radio serials were frequently termed] are as far apart as two poles,” Mr. Hummert explained. “When people go to the theatre, they are willing to accept things as they are, but in radio the characters become so close to the audience and so much a part of their daily life that they come to believe it is the real thing and not make-believe at all.” (“Radio serials,” 1938)

While a few radio serials received high praise for their artistic merits (most notably *Against the Storm*, which won the Peabody Award in Excellence in Radio in 1942),¹² Hummert’s comments presaged a notable shift in evaluative coverage between 1943 and the 1970s, when articles about daytime programming were less about serial *content* and more about the *audience*. During this 30-year period, most articles contained negative commentary about its female viewership—as addicts, as delusional, as losers—regardless of the piece’s main point (Scardaville, 2011a). In other words, this was evaluative commentary but not directly of soap storytelling or elements of the genre; instead, it exposed *NYT* readers to soap opera indirectly through critics’ (mostly poor) perception of its audience. For example, in an article published in the mid-1950s the author ponders the emergent audience for TV soaps through what has “already been established” about the audience for radio serials:

The soap opera audience is overwhelmingly a middle-class-and-lower audience; it admires and envies the upper-middle-class characters in the serials [. . .] They cling to a severe moral code (on which their position as wife and mother is based), but they are anxious about that position [. . .] From the serials they get reassurance. The good wife and mother is important; the threatened home is saved; right triumphs over wrong [. . .] Women say they learn from the serials how to manage their own lives. One observes the serials and wonders. (Seldes, 1954)

This disparagement of the audience, rooted in stereotypes about gender, class, and cultural competence, is also seen in coverage of behind-the-scenes personnel who are depicted as “getting” the absurdity of soap opera in ways the listeners/viewers do not. For example, in an article titled “Ordeal by Soap,” journalist Murray Schumach describes production of an early televised soap:

Actors in these rehearsals are almost eager to offer cuts in their own speeches. They laugh at the lines intended to draw audience snuffles and groan at sections that are supposed to draw laughs. Perhaps never before has so much sweat been poured into so little script; so much fine craftsmanship into so little art. (1950, p. 51)

Content-based commentary returned briefly in the 1970s as journalists debated soaps’ appeal to new audiences (such as university students), their resonance with the tenets of feminism (as noted earlier),¹³ and their dramatization of social issues

including “the ‘generation gap,’ abortion, obscenity, narcotics and political protest” (Bordewich, 1974). By the 1980s, however, *NYT* coverage again shifted away from content toward the economic troubles facing the industry (e.g., soaps’ target female demographic entering the paid labor market). By the mid-1990s, one of the only ways for a opera to receive mention in the *NYT* was if a program or an actor was involved in a charity event (Scardaville, 2011a), and even rare coverage of the treatment of soap opera within academia—itsself a potential factor in the process of artistic legitimation—is undercut by article title (“As the Dissertations Churn: Academe Has the Hots for TV Soaps”) and opening lines: “And you thought the only thing you could learn from soap operas was who was doing it to whom. Silly you” (Kuntz, 1994, p. E4).

In the 2000s, programming content received virtually no coverage at all—even major events such as a lesbian coming-out storyline on *All My Children* (ABC) in 2000 or the 75th anniversary of *Guiding Light* (CBS) in 2003 were overlooked by the paper. Instead, *NYT* soap coverage in the 2000s, such that it existed, focused almost exclusively on local real-world community connections. For example, four Daytime Emmy nominees were profiled in 2001 around the dubious premise that all lived in the same Connecticut town, and a 2003 feature on *Guiding Light* (CBS) focused on a local youth baseball team who served as on-set extras. Perhaps most tellingly of the newspaper’s gradual coverage of soap operas as a “moribund” rather than “viable” genre, fully 29% of the soaps mentioned by name in the 2000s had been canceled the previous decade (Scardaville, 2011a).

Taken together, then, our findings on article *tone* over time that expanded upon prior research on article *theme* over time (Scardaville, 2011a) tell a more ambiguous story about the role of the *NYT* in the artistic legitimation process than the cautiously optimistic note sounded above. Again, tone is important given journalists’ potential role as tastemakers and the concomitant potential of evaluative commentary to influence readers’ consumption decisions: to read a book, attend a play, or watch a TV show (Shrum, 1991, p. 353). To remind, published evaluations answer two basic questions about a cultural object: “What is it? Is it any good?” (Blank, p. 7). But while the overall tone of commentary in the *NYT* is neutral or slightly positive, which we suggested earlier might aid or at least not harm soaps’ bid for artistic legitimation, the fact that the articles focus less and less over time on *soap operas themselves* and more on the soap audience or the broader entertainment landscape tempers this suggestion. We elaborate this point below.

Article authorship/viewership

In the second stage of our analysis, we calculated correlations between article tone and other variables of interest. The association between explicit authorship and article tone was not statistically significant, so there is no relationship between these variables. The correlation between viewership (explicit or implicit evidence of viewership) and the tone of the article, however, is negative and significant ($-.087, p < .01$, one-tailed test), indicating that the less likely it was (to the reader) that the author watched the program, the more likely they were to give it a negative evaluation. In other words,

when it appears the journalist personally listened to or watched the soap opera(s) she/he reviewed, the better the evaluation. Overall, this speaks to the issue of author credibility in the artistic legitimation process. In general, procedural reviews have ethical protections built in (such as detailed descriptions of testing procedures) but the connoisseurial review process “is a black box. Readers cannot easily see how evaluations were reached” (Blank, 2007, p. 133). Since connoisseurial evaluations “rest on the unique skills, sensitivity, training, and experience of a single reviewer” (2007, p. 7), evidence of nonconsumption by journalists might limit their connoisseurial function and compromise the credibility of the commentary.

As noted above, in 70% of the articles coded the author did *not* indicate or provide evidence of consuming soap opera. Why might a professional journalist assigned to cover a cultural object not actually consume the object in question? We do not mean to malign our colleagues at the *NYT* — indeed, in most evaluative contexts (e.g., reviews of a novel or a movie or a basketball game) it would be difficult to imagine published commentary in a reputable news outlet *not* based on the act of personal consumption. Perhaps the author *did* consume soap opera as part of the evaluative process but due to writing conventions (either personal or institutional), she/he elected against indicating so in the published piece. Or perhaps the gradual movement away from reviewing soap opera content to reviewing other elements of the soap landscape (e.g., celebrity gossip) means journalists no longer “had” to consume soaps in order to legitimately write about them (though this raises an interesting question of whether they stopped reviewing content because they were no longer personally consuming soap opera or whether they no longer consumed soap opera because they were no longer assigned to cover programming content. Our data are unable to shed light on this.)

To complicate the issue further, perhaps the format of serial storytelling became a gradual hindrance to the evaluation process. In the early days of radio it appears clear that critics were listening to the soaps they wrote about. For example, one critic summarizes the troubles-based theme of the genre through his observation that the “prevailing sound effect is the barely repressed sob” (Hutchens, 1943a), and in a subsequent article praises the writer of *The Open Door* for dialogue that is “admirable—alive and sensitive [and with] a compelling flow and rhythm” (Hutchens, 1943b). But television, even in the network era, appeared to present a challenge to journalists. Consider the comments of Harriet Van Horne, midcentury critic of both radio and TV:

I did a television column for 20 years, five columns a week, and I was always in a little screening room in the afternoon and at the television set at night [. . .] Had I stayed in television, it would have killed me. Imagine reviewing “I Love Lucy” 20 times. Imagine reviewing “Gunsmoke” 20 times. It would rot anybody’s brain. (Severo, 1998)

In the contemporary era, primetime critics describe their job as “overwhelming” due to “the sheer volume of television programming that needs to be reviewed” (Bielby

et al., 2005, p. 9). In short, choices must be made. Most evaluations of primetime TV are of new (not returning) series, and while “reviewers tend to be more systematic in their coverage of new shows (reviewing the majority, if not all, of the new series),” their commentary on returning shows “tend to be highly selective (reviewing just a few shows)” (2005, p. 13). What choices do critics face with daytime soaps? Consider that until recently, soap episodes aired only once with the day’s content never repeated. Consider, too, the potential longevity of U.S. soap texts—the 15,000+ total broadcast episodes of *The Guiding Light* (CBS), or the 10,000+ episodes of *All My Children* (ABC), or even the 2,000+ episodes of *Santa Barbara* (NBC). What reasonably gets evaluated in these contexts if a reviewer is not already familiar with a show and/or does not work for a publication dedicated to soap coverage? A week’s worth of episodes? A particular storyline? The denouement of a long-running narrative? In this context, the launch of a new soap opera is uniquely newsworthy as “appointment television.” Writes *NYT* critic John O’Connor on the debut of *The Bold and the Beautiful* (CBS) in 1987:

In its own endearingly dopey way, the beginning of a new soap opera is an event worth watching. The sheer mechanics of getting five different plotlines moving simultaneously are staggering, and the shorthand methods of characterization are positively dizzying. (p. C18)

O’Connor’s review introduces readers to the core characters, describes the plot of the premiere episode, and quotes multiple lines of dialogue along with actors’ methods of delivering their lines—clear indications of O’Connor’s viewership. While the overall tone of the article is not exactly positive—he devotes word count to the observation that the actors “all seem to have wonderful teeth”—it is clear to any *NYT* reader that he watched the program. Our point is the *unusual* nature of this type of commentary in later decades of the newspaper. To return to our discussion above, perhaps the gradual shift away from content-based articles in the *NYT* is due to a gradual disengagement of journalists from the act of soap opera consumption, given the genre’s unique format constraints.

Ultimately, and to return to the observation that TV critics today occupy a dual role of reporter and critic, it appears the former has eclipsed the latter at the *NYT*—at least in the context of soap opera and at least in reference to coverage of soap content. In short, critical commentary of soaps in the *NYT* gradually became neither procedural *nor* connoisseurial by declining to engage directly the core issue of product (program) quality—in part due perhaps to the gradual “unreadability” of the format within the world of professional critics. Much as scholars develop a common language and set of tools to interpret textual data, so do professional critics share the same evaluative criteria and adopt their own set of tools. Several decades ago scholars such as Robert Allen (1985) began to develop ways to interpret this unique narrative form but perhaps critics developed no comparable, systematic way to talk about soap quality. Implications for the artistic legitimization of the daytime soap opera form are discussed in the following section.

Conclusion

A prior project (Scardaville, 2011a) explored two sets of thematic frames across 80 years of *NYT* coverage of soap opera, contrasting two frames that helped legitimize the genre (emotional authenticity of soap operas; social relevance of soap storytelling) with two delegitimizing frames (soaps as antiart; viewers as deviant) that were ultimately insightful in constructing the meaning of soap opera that exists today. Soaps' economic success was never matched by a widespread acceptance of the genre's artistry, despite soaps' enduring popular appeal and a dedicated soap press that emerged to mediate between the genre, its audience, and the larger cultural landscape.

The findings presented here help support these conclusions and provide additional understanding into soaps' failure to achieve general validation in the legitimization process. The neutral/slightly positive overall tone of published commentary documented here—which would appear to aid the legitimization process—was ultimately countered by thematic changes in coverage that served to delegitimize the genre. Moreover, the potential connoisseurial function of *NYT* articles, which depends on the singular talent of reviewers and in elite contexts is crucial in determining which objects are worthy of esthetic praise and public attention (Blank, 2007), was limited here by an apparent disconnect between journalists' own consumption habits and the object under question. *NYT* critics' ability to serve as opinion leaders (Eliashberg & Shugan, 1997) in the context of soap opera was thus problematized in an unexpected way—while both connoisseurial and procedural reviews can help shift cultural objects from nonelite to elite status, commentary about soaps in the *NYT* evolved into neither. By the time soaps had entered their rapid decline in the late 1990s/2000s, the questions answered by reviews—“What is it? Is it any good?” (Blank, 2007, p. 7)—were no longer being engaged, the former because “everyone already knows” what soap operas are and the latter because “everyone (but soap fans) knows” the answer is “no.” Indeed, the general diffusion of the concept of “soap opera” into the popular imagination as facilitated by the *NYT*—to refer to sporting events, political debacles, family squabbles, and chick-lit—was utilized by 20th-century cultural entrepreneurs to mobilize *other* cultural objects (namely movies in the 1960s/1970s and primetime TV in the 1980s/1990s) toward esthetic mobility. Rather than soap opera itself achieving artistic legitimization, it became the standard-bearer for low-quality objects despite its enduring popularity among viewers (Scardaville, 2011a).

What role might critical commentary in the *NYT* have played in the actual ratings decline of the genre? We do not have audience data so our remarks here are merely suggestive, but it appears that the shift away from evaluating program content may have fueled the decline by dissuading nonwatchers from the genre. More than 50 years ago, Kurt Lang (1958) observed that TV reviews in mass readership outlets were mostly framed as “Will the viewer like the program?” whereas the approach of elite publications (such as the *NYT*) were more “*Should* the viewer like the program?”

(1958, p. 15; emphasis added). In the *NYT* the answer quickly became “no” — not on the basis of the content of any given program but on the poor reputational qualities associated with soaps’ female viewership and eventually with the soap landscape in its entirety. A mid-1990s ethnography of the soap fan community (Harrington & Bielby, 1995) documented the broad demographics of soap viewership — women (and men) of all socioeconomic classes, esthetic tastes, and educational backgrounds — but who shared a keen awareness of the low-cultural status of the form. At the time of that study even committed soap fans were embarrassed to buy magazines such as *Soap Opera Digest* at the local drugstore. The likelihood that a nonsoap watcher would be introduced to soaps via such a purchase seems nil — so in an era when the industry was desperately trying to cultivate new viewers and was experimenting with the genre in unprecedented ways, the ability of more generalized outlets such as the *NYT* to bridge the producer–consumer gap was essentially abdicated by the review process.

Finally, we note that the functions of newspapers themselves have changed dramatically in the past 20 years, due to new economic challenges, changing business models, and emerging competition for eyeballs, among other factors. As mentioned earlier, newspapers have been the main place to learn about TV shows since the mid-1950s — but entertainment fandom in general has migrated to the web with soap viewers one of the first groups to create online spaces to share information, opinions, and their own evaluations of the genre. The near noncoverage of soaps by the *NYT* in the past 15 years — whether program, audience, or industry news — is thus perhaps indicative of a shift away from newspapers as legitimation agents, at least in the context of certain cultural forms.

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Notes

- 1 Irna Phillips’s *Painted Dreams*, launched in 1930, is considered the first radio soap opera.
- 2 There is no necessary relationship between the economic and artistic legitimacy of a cultural object; while the two legitimating ideologies interact with one another, they have independent trajectories as well. Historically, these forms of legitimacy tended to be inversely related — in order to be accepted as “art” an object’s commercial status was disavowed (DiMaggio, 1982). As such, perhaps the rising economic legitimacy of soaps in the 1950s helped temper the genre’s initial bid for artistic legitimacy, especially because U.S. soaps were tied since inception to the commercial/advertising sphere and to a devalued target audience: women. However, it remains an empirical question how the economic and artistic legitimacy for soap operas interacted over time.
- 3 See van Venrooij (2009) for a discussion of why reviews constitute a particularly good data source for studies of esthetic classification systems.

- 4 There has been extensive empirical research on the relationship between reviews and sales, which finds that reviews can be (but are not always) influential (see Blank, 2007, p. 6).
- 5 Procedural reviews do not work well in an arts context because arts experts “have never been able to develop objective, standardized procedures and criteria to judge the quality of artworks” (Janssen, 2009, p. 941).
- 6 While the role of critics in elite art worlds has long been institutionalized — critics are formally trained and their interpretation and judgment are widely accepted as superseding that of the audience — their role in popular culture has been more broadly debated, with Shrum (1991, 1996) finding them unnecessary but more recent scholarship demonstrating their function and relevance.
- 7 “Daytime serial” and “radio serial” were included for the years 1930–1942 because the term “soap opera” was not used until the late 1930s.
- 8 Not surprisingly, the majority of reviewers (as indicated through byline) were male though the number of females increased over time. While the analysis presented here does not focus on gender, future studies might consider the relationship between reviewer demographics, workplace context, and esthetic valuation of cultural objects, especially because in the context of soap opera the journalists working for the dedicated soap press (e.g., *Soap Opera Digest*) are typically female.
- 9 The first television soap, *Today’s Children*, broadcast in 1949.
- 10 For example, a 1954 article remarked on the “spectacular success of [the soap] genre which everyone was sure would never go in television” (Seldes, 1954).
- 11 *Passions* (NBC) was canceled in 2007, *Guiding Light* (CBS) in 2009, *As the World Turns* (CBS) in 2010, *All My Children* (ABC) in 2011, and *One Life to Live* (ABC) in 2012.
- 12 Critic John K. Hutchens, who appears to be no great fan of the genre in most articles, lamented this serial’s exit from the airwaves after its brief run, praising “this five-a-week program which, for more than three years, has had something important to say, and has said it with great narrative skill, dignity, intelligence and a cast of living and literate characters” (Hutchens, 1942).
- 13 As one journalist observed, “soap operas are the only programs on television that do not adopt a patronizing attitude toward women. There are more women doctors, lawyers, writers, judges, nurses, District Attorneys and corporation executives on daytime television than we ever dreamed of on primetime” (Gutcheon, 1973).

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