

Dumber and dumber

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What have we become?

We go to concerts to hear singers who lip-sync. We watch movies with actors who can't act. We watch "reality" TV shows that have nothing to do with reality. We read books by people who can't write. When did everything become so dumb? Why do we see it at every turn - from Jackass to Fear Factor, from repetitive radio programming to TV shows ripped off from that one, which was ripped off from that one, which was

It's like we're stuck in a big World Wrestling Federation commercial. We have shock DJs pushing people to have sex in church. Washed-up celebrities suffering any indignity, any confession, for a few moments of airtime. It's not the dumbest of times, of course. Great movies still come out, inspiring music is still made, brilliant novels are still being written. But that's not what we hear about. We hear about Liza Minnelli's impossible husband, Winona's shoplifting, The Bachelor, American Idol, Howard Stern's plan to remake Porky's, Rosie's meltdowns. It's all interspersed with ads for cell phones, SUVs, beer, chips and more.

And that's the big clue.

Dumb culture has always been with us, but it's never been so aggressively marketed as it is these days. Advertisers are after that most coveted demographic - the 18- to 34-year-old market, the ones just getting started on cell phones, minivans, diapers and more. "It's not a simple process of 'We'll give it to them and they'll take it.' Advertisers would give us 24 hours of opera if we wanted it. But we don't want it. That's the truth of it," says Michael Marsden, an expert in popular culture at Eastern Kentucky University.

"The market is bigger, and there's a lot of buying power. That's why the networks are feverishly after increasing their 18-34 numbers, and they'll do it any way they can," says Jeff Pollock, chairman of Pollock Media Group, a Los Angeles-based media

consulting firm. "It may appear that there's more gross humor on the air," Pollock says. "But I'm not sure if we went back 10 years and showed a series of movies, TV shows and shock jocks that it's wildly different than it is today. Is more money spent marketing? Of course it is. The use of the Internet is a huge part of reaching the demographic that loves to be on the Web."

Youths in the '60s clung to rock 'n' roll as an emblem of resistance, but rock music long ago turned into just another big business. So younger people today look for other things to make their own.

'Jackass' nation

"It looks like WWF wrestling filled it to some extent, and this whole Jackass thing has become, in a way, that rebellious culture of this generation," says Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University. "People that are not part of it see it as vulgar, stupid and lowbrow." "There are programs that surely do appeal to the lowest common denominator. I understand that," Marsden says.

Historically, shows such as Jerry Springer's and Morton Downey Jr.'s had very little sophisticated subtext; it was straight-out voyeuristic trash and plain meanness. Others give a wink and a nod as they're being dumb. "Let's take Hee Haw. You could look at it as simply a country-bumpkin show. But it operates at many different levels," Marsden says of the '70s country/comedy show. "Hee Haw was aware that we're aware that they're aware that we're aware. You get involved with this elaborate put-on.

There are a whole series of programs out there that really, ultimately, are put-ons. "To some extent, the Survivor shows are like that. We know there's a camera there; they're behaving differently and there are things going on behind the scenes that we don't see." And it's all based on the notion that this is what younger viewers want to see. Advertisers began pursuing the 18-34 demographic back in the '60s and '70s, when they saw this huge population of baby boomers ripe for the picking. "This became this magical Holy Grail that everybody had to go after," Thompson says.

Times have changed; numerous studies lately have pointed out that the 18-34 demographic doesn't buy everything. Like music. According to the Recording

Industry Association of America, the people who spend the most money on music are those 35 and older (44 percent of the CDs sold in 2001, 10 percent more than the 18-34 demo). But selling to someone older is sometimes easier. With older buyers, "sometimes you don't have to spend as many marketing dollars," Pollock says. "James Taylor fans came out in droves to buy the new record." The younger demographic is quicker to jump on a bandwagon. The millions of CDs bought by the older demographic might be spread over hundreds of costly releases. But if the record industry can create blockbusters for younger audiences, they'll buy millions of a single disc - Britney Spears, *NSYNC, Backstreet Boys.

"If they can get that group to commit, there are larger numbers of them who will follow the trend," Marsden says. "It's not that they ultimately have more purchasing power, but they're willing to spend it on things that are trendy. It's a much more controllable group from the viewpoint of the advertisers." "You're training the habits of these people," Thompson says. "You're selling something that's going to keep selling for years down the line. That commercial keeps paying for itself for the entire life span of that person. All the promises that advertising makes - that it's going to save your life - is getting people at a very vulnerable age."

In other words: The 18-34 demographic is judged as the people who will accept dumb stuff. "You're always going to have the demographic being judged by the demographic that's older than them - that what they're doing is bad, just like rock 'n' roll for the baby boomers," Thompson says. "It wasn't until later that the establishment began to put the veneer of respectability on folk music and protest music, which now, of course, is being taught in college classes by baby boomers who were listening to it in their basements, to the great chagrin of their parents 40 years ago."

The good old days?

Once upon a time, these things started more organically. The Simpsons was a short feature on The Tracy Ullman Show, an offshoot Matt Groening did while working on his comic strip Life in Hell. Howard Stern was a DJ in various markets getting fired for the shticks that later made him famous. Things don't creep in through the back door like that these days; instead, it's relentlessly pursued, marketed, packaged and promoted.

"That's true," Thompson says, crediting the growth of cable/satellite TV, the Internet and other outlets. "If you want to get the attention of somebody . . . well, let's say you're a kid in school. There are three other students. You want the teacher's attention, you raise your hand. That's the way the network era was. Now if you want the attention of the teacher with 200 students, you might have to get up on the desk, drop your pants and yell a naughty word.

"That's exactly what the culture is now; it has to be so outrageous just to stop the channel-surfing. We're seeing the equivalent of a culture dropping its pants and saying a naughty word just to get somebody to please pay attention to them - preferably 18-34 year olds." And Thompson says it's now OK to drop your pants. "You can get away with doing it in a way you couldn't have 40 years ago. We're in this real period of not only having a lot more of this material, but it evolves so much quicker.

"We went from The Simpsons to Beavis & Butthead to South Park in a pretty quick period of time. We went from some of these goofy reality shows to the extreme of Jackass in just a couple of years. Everything is accelerated, and there's more of it."

Some tend to romanticize earlier periods as being more artistic. But in the '70s, for each Godfather, there was a Kentucky Fried Movie. For each Blood on the Tracks getting critical acclaim, there was a Bay City Rollers album topping the charts. "Go to any decade and you'll find those who are appealing to the broadest possible audience or prurient interests," Marsden says. "Look at Cecil B. DeMille. He made all those Bible films, but there was more skin in those Bible films than anything else."

You can still go too far.

"Since 9-11, there has been a course correction just in terms of people's attitudes," Pollock says. New York shock jocks Opie & Anthony were famously fired this summer after an on-air stunt ended in a couple's having sex in a church. And according to the pair's Web site, the pair can't get hired anywhere. But are we taking our morals to the toilet? "Most of this stuff is pretty harmless. The only real argument is, 'Are people gonna go and copy this stuff?' In the end, that is the problem of kids who don't know any better," Thompson says.

"If we were to worry about those outliers, those two or three in a million that do something ridiculous, we'd be reduced to silence. If all of us had to watch only things that were safe for everyone to watch, then there'd be no stories left to tell." "We don't have enough sex and violence on television. What I mean by that is, we don't contextualize it; we don't show the consequences," Marsden says. "You can dehumanize people if you don't put that activity in a human context and show the results of it."

In the end, Thompson says, all this proves is that Shakespeare was right - there is nothing new under the sun. "What Jackass is doing is part of a long tradition. The big difference is, it used to only happen in locker rooms or wherever. Now it's kind of reached the public forum. "My guess is, Neanderthals were making farting and puking jokes back when we were eating saber- toothed tigers."