

Middle-class struggle

More than ever, media is diverging into blockbusters and niches—with everything else struggling.

JOE SWANBERG makes films about the romantic lives of young urbanites. He shoots quickly with a digital camera and asks actors to wear their own clothes. His films, which tend to cost between \$30,000 and \$50,000 to make, are almost never shown in cinemas. Instead they are available on pay-television as video-on-demand, as downloads from iTunes (Apple's digital store) or as DVDs. By keeping his costs down and distributing digitally, Mr Swanberg is making a living.

Technology was expected to help young artists like Mr Swanberg. In 2006 Chris Anderson, the author of "The Long Tail", predicted that the internet would vastly increase the supply of niche media products and bring audiences to them. That has certainly happened. But so has the opposite. In film, music, television and books, blockbusters are tightening their grip on audiences and advertisers (see article). The growth of obscure products has come at the expense of things that are merely quite popular. The loser in a world of almost limitless entertainment choice is not the hit, but the near-miss.

There are several reasons for this. Some are as old as Charles Dickens (or perhaps even Homer). People still want to have something to talk about with their friends. Thus "American Idol" and "The X-Factor" do pretty much as well as TV hits did ten years ago, "New Moon" has just set a new record at the box office and bestselling books sell better than ever. Research shows that people enjoy hits more than they do obscure stuff, often because they are the only thing that many people try in that genre: lucky Dan Brown and Katie Price.

But some things are new. All that technology that has made niche content so much more accessible has also proved handy for pushing blockbusters. Missed "Twilight", the predecessor of "New Moon"? There will be other chances to catch it, in a wide variety of formats. Technology helps hits zip around the world, too—even in the art market (see our special report).

Blockbusters are doing well not in spite of the fact that people have more choice in entertainment, but because of it. Imagine walking into a music shop containing 4m songs (the number available on We7, a free music-streaming service in Britain) or more than 10m (the choice on iTunes), all of them arranged alphabetically in plain boxes. The choice would be overwhelming. It is far easier to grab the thing everybody is talking about or that you heard on the radio that morning.

The paradox of choice

Is this increasing polarisation into blockbusters and niches good or bad? It certainly makes life harder for media companies. In a world of growing entertainment options it is more important than ever to make a splash. Miss the top of the chart, even by a little, and your product ends up fighting for attention along with thousands—perhaps millions—of other offerings. That prospect makes for jitters and, sometimes, conservatism. Broadcast television programmes must succeed quickly or they will be cancelled. It is becoming even harder to talk studio bosses into approving some kinds of film. Want to make a complicated political drama, based on an original screenplay, with expensive actors in exotic locations? Good luck with that.

Yet the challenge for the moguls is a boon to consumers. In the past firms made a lot of money supplying content that was not too objectionable to people who did not have much of a

choice. In a world of hugely expanded options they cannot get away with this. These days there is rarely nothing good on television. So media companies must raise their game.

Creative types who are accustomed to lavishing money on moderately appealing projects will have to do more with less. Or they must learn how to move between big-budget blockbusters and niche, small-budget fare, observing the different genre and budget constraints that apply in these worlds. A few forward-looking folk, such as Steven Soderbergh, a film-maker, are already doing this. Some will find shelter. Premium television channels such as HBO, which are built on passion more than popularity, offer some protection from chill market winds. So do state broadcasters like the BBC.

Thinking people naturally deplore the rise of lowest-common-denominator blockbusters, and wish that more money were available to produce the kind of music, films and television programmes they like. The problem is that everybody has different ideas about exactly what they want to see. Some may thrill to a documentary about Leica cameras; others may want to spend an hour being told how to cook a better bouillabaisse. But not many want to do either of these things, which explains why such programmes are niche products. There are only a few things that can be guaranteed to delight large numbers of people. They are known as blockbusters.

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