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Producing Audiences Through Television Metrics
Response

Though I'm interested in discussing the refinement of the Nielsen television ratings system and the attendant issues raised by those changes, I primarily want to speak about several new media metrics being used on the YouTube website. One of the ways in which YouTube set itself apart from television and earlier online video sites was by letting the audience see one another, literally, through the creation of response videos and user profile pictures, and metaphorically, through the viewing statistics displayed prominently throughout the site.

I want to argue that does two things: changes the acts of creating and viewing videos from private acts into public acts, creating a community and stripping users of whatever privacy they were accustomed to having while watching media; gives the audience and amateur video creators more power (or the potential for more power) via knowledge of viewing habits which used to be the exclusive domain of market researchers.

The most basic YouTube metric is Views. This, and the "Most Viewed" video page, isn't terribly different than Nielsen's publicly available top 10 lists for each week of television. It paints a broad picture of what the most popular videos are, but is less apt to distort the actual number of viewers than Nielsen because the numbers reflect a census of the viewing population rather than a sample.

By clicking on the name of any user who has posted a comment on a video or has posted a video, you can find information about what that specific viewer likes. The profiles are, in the strict sense, anonymous in that they do not require the viewer to use his or her real name or picture (in practice, almost no one does use their real world identity). However, they are not anonymous in the same way that the millions of viewers estimated by Nielsen television ratings are anonymous. YouTube users often list favorite videos or, in some cases, their viewing history, on their profile pages. Just by clicking on the profiles of a few of the commenters on the most popular videos (example: an ad from John McCain's campaign), a user can get an idea of just how diverse or narrow many users' tastes are.

After a few more clicks on a few more profiles, psychographics emerge, and not necessarily ones that are consistent with our traditional notions of audiences.

I'm the most intrigued by two relatively new developments in viewer tracking technology on YouTube. The Insights feature allows uploaders of video to track the number of viewers per day of each of their videos across one year. It allows them to see where those viewers are, whether they report to be male or female, and how old they report to being. The second feature I'd like to talk about is Active Sharing. This allows viewers to see who else is watching a video at a given moment. In effect, it takes the act of passively watching a video, one which I think we've been lulled into thinking is automatically private, and makes it public. This allows other viewers to get a clearer sense of who is watching popular video, not just who is commenting on or responding to these videos.

As I stated earlier, I think these features turn the act of viewing into a public act, something that has legal implications. When we voice concern over Youtube handing over the viewing records of every user to Viacom or Google handing over all of the search records to the federal government, we tacitly acknowledge that this data is powerful and could possibly be used by the owner of that data to affect the lives of its subjects. Now that some of that data is available to anyone at anytime (and should they choose, they could aggregate it and look for trends), the power to survey rests in the hands (or eyes) of the consumer, not the marketer or the government.

This allows audiences to confront some of the stereotypes about media and their target demographics. Media texts are often seen as stand-ins for groups who are believed to be ideologically or ethnically homogenous. This may turn out to be even more true than many suspect, but these new metrics allow viewers to move beyond generalizations based on preconceived notions and actually get an idea of who watches what. Additionally, these metrics (particularly Insights) help amateur content producers become competitive in the media marketplace. The popularity of professional media is not only a result of superior production equipment and extensive promotion channels, but also of focus groups and test audiences. Insights transcends focus groups and gives all creators, amateur and professional alike, the ability to find

out who their target psychographic really is and be able to take that into account when creating and promoting future content.