

Attend the Audience: Changing Audience Analysis

Harnessing Data: Creating a Digital Metric Based on Cultural Usefulness

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In December of 2012, the Nielsen Audience Measurement Company and Twitter signed an exclusive relationship to create a Social TV metric. Nielsen's President of Global Media Products and Advertiser Solutions, Steve Hasker, told Anthony Ha of Tech Crunch that the new metric was designed to complement existing ratings by bringing "engagement out of the shadows" and "identify shows that don't necessarily have the best traditional ratings, but that get a lot of support on Twitter." After decades of dissatisfaction with the ratings system, best characterized by Eileen Meehan's description of the "commodity audience," the emergence of an alternative way of understanding the audience would seem like cause for celebration. Yet this Social TV metric, like most digital metrics, is being used to prop up established modes of monetizing the audience instead of offering a deeper understanding of engagement. The Nielsen/Twitter metric simply counts how many people are involved in the discussion about a show on Twitter while ignoring the content of that conversation. Thus Nielsen incorporates a competitor (social network analytics) while offering advertisers another reason to deal in the currency of the ratings system. Instead of causing the industry to reconsider how they engage the audience, digital metrics are being used to validate programming strategies like traditional live event programming. Big Data can provide detailed information about the ways audiences interpret and use culture in their everyday lives yet digital metrics reduce online behavior to an easily digestible number that is sold to advertisers and television executives.

Television scholars have an opportunity to return to audience studies at a crucial moment when new measurement technology and fragmented viewership are causing the television industry to focus on audience engagement. If we embrace digital measurement tools, we can reveal the complicated relationship people have with television texts. In the past, we have had two major tools to use when studying the audience; surveys and ethnographic observation. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses but ethnographic studies of television fans became the more popular tool because it was best for demonstrating the complexity of the audience experience. Fan studies have their problems, especially the tendency to over celebrate creative interpretations and political resistance, but they have been essential to understanding how people use television in their daily lives. As Newcomb and Hirsch famously asserted, television operates as a cultural forum, a source of raw material that goes beyond the living room and enables people to engage one another on matters of public concern. Could a return to audience studies inspire the creation of cultural studies based metric that taps digital platforms like social networks, meme generators, and

editing tools? Analytics expert Nate Silver warns that many interpretations of Big Data over-generalize and confuse “the signal and the noise.” Emphasizing the specifics of cultural use, as cultural studies scholars have done in case studies, is the key to creating a digital metric that describes the value of television as culture instead of as a medium for attracting eyeballs.

I do not mean to blindly celebrate digital technology as the answer to the ills of the television industry. It is clear that mining viewer data will raise privacy concerns and could easily lead to greater exploitation of the audience. I do however believe that a digital metric designed by television scholars would be a better use of emerging technology than those that simply prop up failing industries. We could use this new metric to identify audience constituencies, desires, and cultural uses that are being ignored by media companies. Creating a metric that accounts for the creative engagement of the audience could lead to a more nuanced relationship between the audience and television producers. Producers are more accountable to their audiences when they directly engage with them as evidenced by exchanges between the producers and consumers of *Saturday Night Live*, *Girls*, and *Veronica Mars*. Producers of these shows have reacted to their audiences by making casting decisions, reconsidering representation, and developing narratives. Additionally, digital platforms like the forthcoming *Simpsons World* promises to offer greater use of the primary texts by enabling audiences to curate episodes through playlists and allow editing functionality through the ability to make and share clips from any episode. A digital metric could encourage these small efforts to make television texts more useful. This metric would evaluate television shows based on their ability to encourage conversation and creativity and not simply draw viewers.