

Attend the Audience: Changing Audience Analysis

Watching at Work

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In the United States, people continue to spend a significant amount of their time engaging in laboring activities (e.g., not just working, but commuting, studying for credentials that will later help in the job marketplace, and, especially under our current dire employment conditions, searching for [more/better] work). Work is something of an organizing force for people's lives: not only does it literally shape people's days and their activities, it also impacts how people understand their identities and their relations to others. How people understand work and their position in relation to work is thus a crucial question for a cultural studies project interested in, as Williams defines culture, "a whole way of life." Furthermore, work, as it has been culturally constructed in the U.S., has *always* been structured by unequal and systemic power relations. It is one of the key engines of economic and socio-cultural inequality and therefore requires close analysis from any project seriously interested in combating abusive power. Thus, in answering this panel's call, I propose we attend the working audience. (And here, I acknowledge that "work" is itself a label of value applied to some activities and not others, e.g., paid employment versus typically feminized care giving efforts, and I suggest we interpret work broadly to capture a range of audience practices and experiences.)

Contemporary discussions of audience labor tend to turn on two familiar poles: the audience commodity and fan productivity. While there certainly have been and continue to be productive discussions in these spheres, by reconfiguring how we couple the terms audience and labor, we can open new avenues for research into how audiences understand and utilize texts within their everyday lives. Rather than assuming television's status as a leisure technology, I propose we consider how audiences understand their media consumption when television is made to fit within the structures and spaces of work. A turn to *laboring* audiences activates a wide field of understudied texts (training programs, internal communications), technological systems (CCTV, satellite), and practices (time bending), leading to studies ranging from the compulsory viewing of orientation videos to workers' strategies for surreptitiously screening television programs during the workday. As mobile television technologies unsettle the bond between television and the home, such studies—even if focused on the subset of "work" spaces and practices—help elucidate the wider importance of place and activity as contexts of reception.

Of course, the texts we watch and meanings we make while working do not leave us as soon as we move on to leisure pursuits. Nor do we check our leisure-time audience understandings at the workplace door. Indeed, major companies often hire celebrities or draw from popular film and television properties in their internal media efforts to blur the lines between corporate communication and popular culture. Attending the working audience entails working across leisure and labor to contextualize media reception practices within the scale of people's lives rather than artificially separating individual spheres of activity. How to do this remains a challenge and I hope

that might be one of the things we talk about today. In closing, I'll suggest a few questions we might consider when in pursuit of the audience watching while working.

- How do we account for compulsory viewing (employee videos but also flight staff in airports, wait staff in sports bars); especially as on-demand services allow users greater control over the programming they watch in their leisure time, how can we adapt the tools of audience analysis to better understand the meanings people make from content not of their own choosing?
- Where might we locate productive overlaps between working audiences and audience phenomena henceforth studied primarily in relation to commercial and entertainment media? How can we follow identification, identity, and empathy across the lines of entertainment and institutional television?
- What can attending to working watchers tell us about the ways in which space and activity shape reception? What mechanisms and tools developed within audience studies might we use for such analysis?