WATCHING WITH THE WORLD

Television Audiences and Online Social Networks

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Executive Summary

What is the Television Audience?

The landscape of television technology today is in constant fluctuation. With the development of Internet-based technology combined with broadcast television – everything from the DVR to IPTV to Over The Top (OTT) options like Netflix and YouTube – the options for television distribution and consumption are numerous and fragmented. The television audience also has experienced fragmentation, across cable networks (Napoli 2003) and now away from traditional broadcast schedules, turning instead to online options like Hulu. So how do we define the television audience in an era of chaos?

The television audience has been conceptualized along various theoretical and practical lines. Both Ang (1991) and Mosco (1996) argue that the television audience is a product of the industry, lacking any social context beyond demographic groupings. Ang (1991) notes that, over twenty years ago, characterized through a representative ratings system, the actual viewers watching television were invisible conceptually and technologically to the television industry. In a much different televisual area, today it is more valuable to look at practices like information sharing to define audiences. While the industry has adopted more detailed studies, such as the use of focus groups to calibrate concepts, examining practices invokes further theoretical issues. Lunt and Livingstone (1996) question whether the audience should be defined as a group of individuals that share common behaviors of watching TV or as a collective that engages with one another. If characterized by group dynamics, Livingstone (1998) also asks if the audience represents a unified group or a diverse set of subgroups. In response, I approach the label of “audience” as a malleable category that encompasses varying behaviors yet unifies diverse participants around media and information while moving beyond statistical extrapolations and outdated abstractions.

The ratings systems that dominate the television industry fix the television audience as a group that exhibits one behavior: watching television programming. However, media audiences actually exhibit a range of practices beyond mere viewing, such as evaluating media, discussing topics socially, generating content, sharing information, attending fan events, and even leaving the room during a TV show. While the concept of television audiences as constructed by television ratings remains valuable for certain purposes, it does not account for the diverse range of behaviors in which audiences participate. These other behaviors beyond simply watching television are valuable for understanding how and why viewers connect with and mobilize around media content, providing more productive feedback about audience interest and value.
Media institutions define audiences by exposure, but these metrics only account for estimations of audiences and do not reflect why audiences are drawn to certain content. C3 Researcher Sheila Seles (2010) instead calls for the industry to recognize audience expression over impression because expressive behaviors show why audiences engage in the first place: “[I]nstead of letting the outmoded concept of “exposure” or the Internet misnomer “impression” dictate the value of the audience, we need to understand TV viewing as an expressive process.”

This C3 research memo aims to address the expressive and participatory practices of online television audiences. Television audience participation online has been radically shifting to new forms of practice over the past decade as more and more users interact with the Web and other Internet-connected services. Prior to these recent trends, most participation online revolved around television “communities,” where fans primarily interacted with other fans. However, with the rise of social network sites, viewers are constructing a more-social ecosystem that will affect how current and future audiences engage and identify with television content. Rather than a group of likeminded strangers, users on social network sites (SNS) are connected to others they know. Likewise, SNS provide opportunities to perceive trends across large populations and wide ranges of viewers. By mapping out the evolution of television audiences’ participatory spaces and practices, this memo outlines the evolving technical and social ecosystem that mediates audience participation online.

**Summary and Implications**

To examine in depth the value of online audiences, this memo looks at the development of and research about Internet technology and the social structure of communities online. The memo establishes that:

1. Early online television communities formed around shared interests in specific online spaces.

2. The development of social network sites (SNS) helped different social behaviors emerge online because of increased visibility and accessibility of users.

3. While SNS do not represent the only online platforms where television audiences reside and interact, they can be excavated to extract significant, previously unavailable data and trends.
The recent development of Internet-based technologies will influence the future of television audiences, both in how audiences watch television content and how viewers interact with each other. The implications of placing value in social media and SNS are:

1. **Evolution of Platforms**: The industry must recognize that platforms will evolve and change, and while design will subtly reshape behaviors, social participation should remain constant. The industry must therefore be ready to evolve with the Web and be ready to engage consumers with flexible media experiences that cater to, rather than suppress, these social practices.

2. **Recommendation Systems**: The availability of widespread social networks, especially integrated with media viewing devices, allows the industry greater opportunities to engage with networks of consumers, rather than simply individuals. Recommendations systems are one area where these networks can be exploited to help deliver content, spread awareness, and reinforce brand identity, while providing the industry better systems to measure consumer engagement online.

3. **Global Ecosystem**: With more users online than ever before, the industry should push to make its content as widely available as possible. As social networks span global markets, so too should companies embrace global distribution, allow television content to spread across those vast networks, and aim to broadcast simultaneous worldwide releases.
About C3 Research Memos

Introduced in the spring of 2010, Convergence Culture Consortium (C3) research memos are short (8 to 11 pages) position papers - designed from their inception to provide more tactical, design-driven recommendations to the C3 membership. Ideally, these recommendations would then be introduced into the early phase (i.e. ideation or brainstorming) of the strategic design process for new media products, delivery services and content programming.

The suggestion here is that an evangelist (or “champion”) of these innovative insights and recommendations would then be able to:

a. Assemble a working group within or across organizational divisions, departments, professions or academic disciplines; and

b. Use C3 research memos as a “common language” for these working group sessions - framing product development, strategic marketing, content programming or market research challenges and subsequent discussions within the framework of “C3 Thinking.”

We encourage the creation of such working groups within C3 Sponsor company organizations. By taking this approach, the hope is that new products, services and programming would better reflect the emergent cultural and media engagement patterns unearthed by the current crop of C3 research.

2010 – 2011 C3 Research Memo Series (to date)

- Online Advertising: The New Magic by Ravi Inukonda with Daniel Pereira
- Piracy is the Future of Television by Abigail De Kosnik
- Embracing the Flow by Nancy Baym
- You and Our Space by Shenja van der Graaf
- Aging and the Future of Media Fandom by C. Lee Harrington
- Assumption Hunters: A New Profession for the Corporation in the Throes of Structural Change by Grant McCracken
- Watching with the World: Television Audiences and Online Social Networks by Alex Leavitt

2010- 2011 C3 White Papers

In contrast to our research memo series, C3 white papers are longer, higher level discussions (more strategic in nature - i.e. Spreadable Media (2008) or the upcoming How to Ride a Lion by Geoff Long). 2010-2011 C3 White Papers include:

- Learning to Share: The Relational Logics of Media Franchising by Derek Johnson
- Turn On, Tune In, Cash Out: Maximizing the Value of Television Audiences by Sheila Seles
- How to Ride a Lion: A Call for a Higher Transmedia Criticism by Geoff Long (forthcoming)