

Attend the Audience: Changing Audience Analysis

Audience as Mediatizing Movement of Attention

Sarah Murray, University of Wisconsin-Madison

What if to study audiences is to study the movement of attention? In response to the call to attend the audience, I propose that audience, as an analytic, locates moving attention. To see audiences as mediatizing, moving attention is to renew audience analysis as a cultural studies project.

The meaning of audience evolves from an etymological root that defines the act of hearing into a modern understanding of audience as a collective giving of attention. Media and cultural studies interested in audience as a methodological frame have thus focused on strategies through which we might capture and assess particular modes of attending as ordinary processes.

Movement has been an empowering lens through which scholars have identified active modes of attending, a central problematic that implicitly grounds much of what audience analysis has concluded: audiences, as individuals located in social groups, resist and negotiate dominant ideologies; audiences are the site of interpretive flexibility; audiences disrupt the boundaries between production and consumption; and audiences are at once a construction of industrial logic and the industry's own Achilles heel.

Movement has also been the double-edged sword of audience analysis: the unpredictable nature of shifting attention has both repelled frustrated scholars from audience as a methodology (i.e., the "moving target" problem: why waste time trying to capture something or someone we can't?) and been upheld as the most cultural studies approach possible (i.e., the industry is constantly undermined by its failure to gather empirical referents).

How, then, does recognizing and re-centering movement break new ground in audience analysis? What is the value of this broadened definition of audience as attention-in-flux? Audience analysis grounded in recognition of movement is one axis on which media studies might productively shift from epistemological frames of mediation to mediatization.

Emergent over the past decade, the turn toward mediatization is largely understood as a shift in the understanding of media *positioning* in social and cultural life. Definitions are varied, but generally *mediation* describes technology's facilitation and circumscription of communication and meaning, while *mediatization* more accurately identifies media as long-term embedded institutional, discursive, and technological prevalences that shape knowledge and accompany everyday life. Put more simply, mediation might be understood as a *relation to*, whereas mediatization delineates a *relation with*.

Thus, mediatization as a frame supports the necessity of audience analysis to identify two interconnected types of movement: the shifting of attention and its undermining of power long established by audience theorists, but also the movement of audience analysis *out of* the stagnant but intuitive realm of studying people. Through a mediation frame, audience analysis too often identifies movement as people in relation to (media) power. In this model, media and people are largely seen as separate entities, despite audience theory's acknowledgement of the complex and uneven interaction of structural and microprocessual power. Mediatization is a helpful redirection of this analysis toward the process of locating power in the moving attentions that are the convergence of individuals, institutions, technologies, and language.

If mediatization is a frame for understanding how social and cultural fields come to be reshaped and re-known by and through media, then defining audience as moving attention points us toward the energized sites where the reconfiguration of meaning is taking place.

While this (re)definition of audience as moving attention establishes the utility of mediatization for the field, maintains the power of audiences as moving targets, and in some ways, consolidates media studies traditional inroads of production-text-audience under the umbrella of audience analysis (an updated version of the integrated approach), the question of practical methods is left largely unattended. However, a broadened definition opens up the methodological frame of audiences to contemporary theoretical modalities and neighboring disciplines such as affect studies and queer theory. Here is where we may find clues for empirically assessing how attention is distributed, measured, and defined in its layered movement.