Surveillance of Audience Labor Using New Media: Three Innovations of Television Broadcast Networks

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Abstract

In response to the proliferation of channels, the growth of the Internet, and the availability of time-shifting and advertisement-blocking technologies, how are television broadcast networks using new media innovations to efficiently exploit and sell audience labor to advertisers? Drawing upon insights from political economy approaches to audience labor, this poster outlines three new media strategies television broadcast networks use to better exploit audience labor: online broadcasting, audience-generated content, and social media as product placement. These strategies enhance the capacity of networks and advertisers to better measure audience labor through heightened surveillance available in new media. Understanding the surveillance and exploitation of audience labor by using these strategies is essential for empowering audiences as television and new media become increasingly integrated across platforms.

Keywords: new media, television, audience labor, surveillance

Introduction

Individualization of audience members is crucial to behavioral advertising, and television broadcast networks are pursuing a diversified portfolio of strategies to engage and surveil audience labor. This poster addresses the question: In what ways are television broadcast networks using new media tools to expand surveillance and exploitation of audience labor? The poster outlines three distinct strategies broadcast networks use to leverage new media to better surveil and exploit audience labor: providing online content, engaging audiences in new types of explicit labor or work through interactive or social networking tools, and normalizing the use of social media via program content. Outlining these strategies is a necessary first step for understanding the new political economy of audience labor when the lines between traditional broadcast television and new media are increasingly blurred.

Television Networks, Advertising and Audiences

Most television broadcast networks are based on the free-media model (Evans, 2008, p. 362-363). Central to the free-media model is the ability to surveil audiences. Traditionally, television networks would surveil their audiences by way of third party ratings services provided by marketing research companies, like A.C. Nielsen, that collect demographic and psychographic data through scientific sampling and intensive interview studies with audiences (Smythe, 2001, p. 258). Ratings are an important source of information for media and advertisers because they assure that the work of audiences is done in the most efficient way possible (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 236). Their control of the means of broadcasting enables the mass media and content providers to be brokers that sell the audience's watching time to advertisers (Jhally and Livant, 1986, p. 130; see also Caraway, 2011).

Recent technological changes have fragmented audiences, changing the capacity of television networks to exploit and surveil audience labor (Turow, 2005, p. 111). Of greater concern are advances that allow audiences to by-pass advertising altogether, such as personal video recorders (PVRs). Meanwhile, the Internet provides new challenges and opportunities. The Internet appears to crowd out some people's television watching (Liebowitz and Zentner, 2012). However, television programming is

serialized, creating opportunities for time-shifting and online viewing with potential for expanding audiences rather than depleting them (Waldfogel, 2009, p. 161). It is this potential that broadcast television networks have embraced.

By encouraging audiences to participate in interactive Web-based media, networks are able to collect detailed information about audiences. Interactive websites expand and amplify the commodification process of audiences, particularly by "narrowcasting," a strategy to increase the extraction of surplus value through extensive categorization and profiling (on narrowcasting in general, see Jhally and Livant, 1986, p. 139). Such narrowcasting facilitates personalized behavioral advertising, enabling networks to generate additional revenue and continuing brand loyalty (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 234-235; McStay, 2011, p. 319). By moving audiences onto websites, networks are also able to ensure engagement with content and minimize audience shirking. New media and online participation also serve to further deskill audience labor, making it as easy as possible to participate because networks directly measure audience labor through interactive features of programming or online content rather than cumbersome viewer surveys.

Online Advertising, Audiences & New Media

An informal content analysis suggests television networks use some combination of three different strategies for expanding their exploitation of audience labor using new media.

Online Broadcasting of Content

Television networks provide their broadcast content online, either on their own websites (e.g., ABC.com, Discovery.com) or third-party distribution websites (Netflix.com, Hulu.com). Some of these sites use display advertising, including placement of ads around the periphery of the screen or short video clips or commercials between content. Display advertising can be sold either through first-party (or direct) advertising, where the network or the media content provider (e.g. NBC or Hulu) collects viewer data and sells advertising space directly to advertisers, or through third-party (or indirect) advertising networks, where a third party, such as Google, in turn sells space to advertisers. Between 70 to even 95 percent of large content-providing websites (including traditional television and print media providers) use first-party direct sales (Evans, 2008, p. 385). While third-party advertising networks charge a fifteen to twenty percent commission on revenue (Evans, 2008, p. 385-386), they often have superior surveillance capabilities (McStay, 2011, p. 314-315). Third-party advertising networks also better tailor ads to viewers due to their larger pool of advertisers.

Table 1
Nexus of online programming considerations

Online display advertising strategy	Site of program streaming or distribution	
	Network site (NBC, WB, etc.)	**Third-party distribution site (Netflix, Hulu)**
Direct (first-party) advertising	More direct oversight of audience labor, less detailed audience surveillance	Opportunity to expand audience labor, less detailed information about wider audience (& non-audience)
Indirect (third-party) advertising (e.g., Google)	More direct oversight of audience labor, more detailed information from audience surveillance	Opportunity to expand audience labor, more detailed information from audience surveillance

Television networks face trade-offs about whether to provide their programming content online. Aside from the costs associated with developing sufficient infrastructure to stream programming on a network site, broadcast networks also must balance their desire to capture their existing audience to the

exclusion of other networks against their desire to poach or attract new audience members. Strong connections between particular programs and audiences may enable networks to force audiences to come to their site for content. Less popular shows may benefit from the exposure from appearing alongside other networks' shows on a shared distribution platform, like Hulu.com. These considerations create a nexus of decisions (Table 1). The best strategy will vary according to the production costs (revenue needs) of the program or its existing audience size and loyalty. Networks may not be willing to pay for extra surveillance of audiences of particular types of shows, while shows with higher production costs will need larger audiences to attract the necessary revenue. Further, networks generate viewership for new offerings by predicting user preferences based on a detailed data profile.

Audience-Generated Content

Television networks expand audience labor through other forms of explicit labor, or work, and engagement via both online network-controlled websites and third-party fan or social networking sites. These outlets harness explicit work of audiences by outsourcing research and development about programming ideas to the audience and generating website content that becomes network property (Figure 1). These sites also act as unpaid focus groups, expand interest and participation in programming, and collect personal information about forum participants (Andrejevic, 2008).

Figure 1. Online viewer forum for *Dirty Jobs*. Source: http://community.discovery.com/eve/forums/a/cfrm/f/5141981108. Accessed September 24, 2012.

Similarly, networks engage audiences by creating interactive television shows based on voting or audience participation by phone or online. The audience labor, or participation, becomes part of the programming content. Since MTV pioneered audience participation in its show *TRL* (*Total Request Live*),

popular competition shows, such as *Dancing with the Stars* (*DWTS*), *American Idol*, and *The X Factor*, now encourage audiences to vote via toll-free phone numbers, SMS text messaging, online at the program's website, or via Twitter. By suggesting particular folksonomies (e.g., #hashtags) during programming (Figure 2), networks are able to collect real-time viewer data, making the audience more valuable to advertisers. Such programs also discourage time-shifted viewing.

Figure 2. Integration of social media during online broadcast of *The X Factor*. Source: Screenshot of The *X Factor USA* site (www.thexfactorusa.com) Twitter integration (24 September 2012)

Television networks also exploit explicit audience labor, or work, through third-party fan or social networking sites. This type of audience participation, where users are granted pseudo-producer status, expands interest in and time spent watching future programming. Most importantly, it reinforces the link between programming, audience labor participation and surveillance. Viewer use of third-party social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, also help advertise programming to new audiences, a form of targeted, word-of-mouth advertising to an audience member's online social network. These innovations move audience labor online where it can be more efficiently engaged, surveiled, and sold to advertisers.

Normalizing Social Media Via Program Content

Networks also rely on product placement, or hybrid advertising, inside programming to capture audience labor. While product placement itself is not new, broadcast networks are now implicitly advertising new and social networking media, which serves to familiarize audiences with these tools and normalize their use, further facilitating audience labor (cf. Brown, 2006 on the normalization of surveillance in film). Examples include detectives using Facebook to solve crimes (*Psych*) and characters defriending each other on Facebook (*The Big Bang Theory*), as illustrated (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Normalizing Facebook on *Psych* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Source: *Psych* (Season 4, Episode 4) and *The Big Bang Theory* (Season 5, Episode 10)

This integration of social networking websites into broadcast programming content is clearly a form of product placement, with the websites being the products being promoted by networks. The creation of "real" Twitter and Facebook accounts for characters (Figure 4) that mirror the story-lines and integration of the use of social networking media both online and offline, in broadcast content, provides added incentives for audiences to follow or interact with online network content. In these ways, networks are better able to surveil their audience and its labor and market their content to audience members' online social networks.
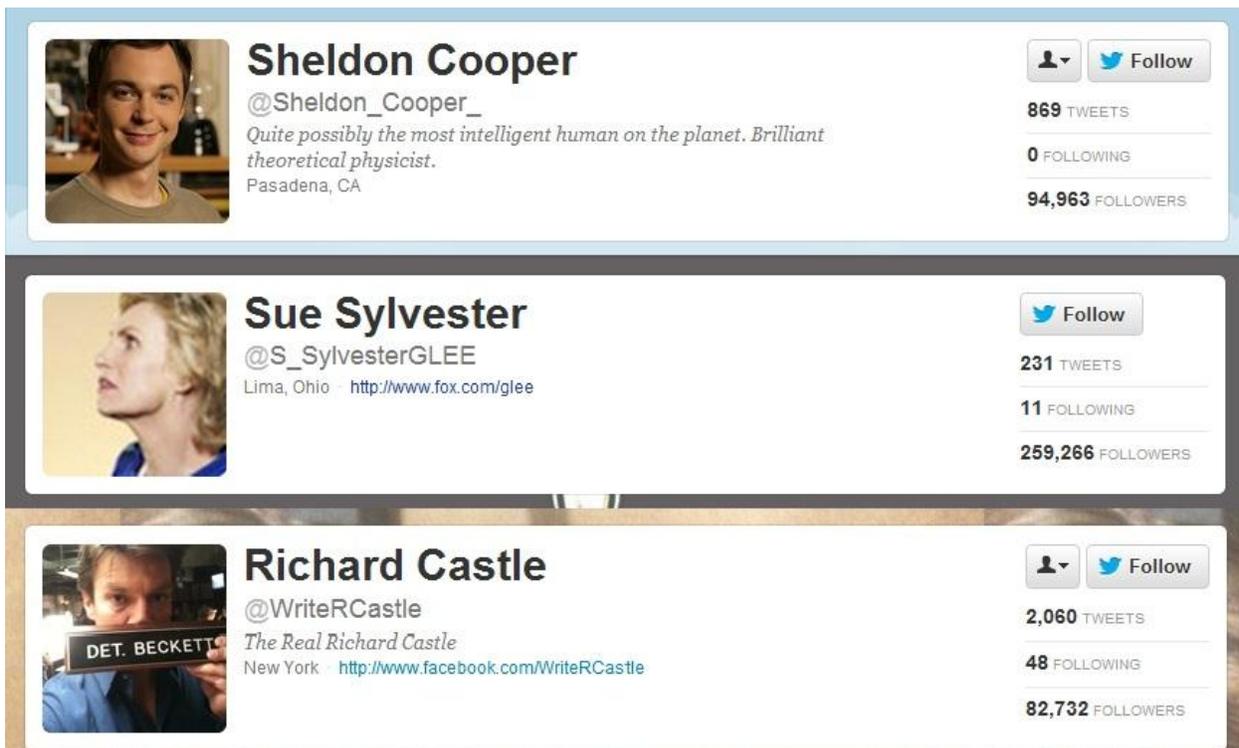

Figure 4. Engaging audiences and normalizing Twitter use. Source: Screenshots of Twitter accounts of fictional characters Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*, twitter.com/Sheldon_Cooper_), Sue Sylvester (*Glee*, twitter.com/S_SylvesterGLEE), and Richard Castle (*Castle*, twitter.com/WriteRCastle). Accessed September 24, 2012.

Conclusion

The preceding theoretical discussion highlights the importance of the use of new media's surveillance capacity for the effective capture of audience labor by television networks. By outlining three distinct new media strategies, the poster serves as a springboard for future research, which should focus on understanding when and why television networks use certain new media strategies and how the use of these strategies affects audiences' enjoyment or perception of their television consumption. An understanding of these strategies, which now only resides among network executives, producers, writers, and advertisers who design new media content, is essential if audiences are to reclaim agency and some autonomy over their labor for networks.

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