

The Future of the Audience

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A few years ago I attended a large business meeting on the east coast. The chair of the meeting, a Vice President, after welcoming the participants, looked out across the audience and made a request: “Please don’t multi-task. I need your full attention.” But, although initially laptops were dutifully closed with soft ‘snicks’ and people sat up straight and directed their gazes attentively at him, after a few minutes the lure of the network was too great: laptops were surreptitiously reopened, email clients launched, and instant messaging sessions initiated.

With the increasing ubiquity of wireless networks, multi-tasking has infiltrated a variety of venues where previously it was not welcome. Meetings. Concerts. Classrooms. Multi-tasking, carried out with varying levels of discretion depending on the venue, means that the speaker, performer or teacher can no longer count on the audience’s undivided attention.

Of course, although it feels quite natural, the notion that a group should give a person or performance its undivided attention is relatively recent. While today an audience attending a performance of Hamlet is well behaved, at the time of Shakespeare audiences were unruly. It was only during the late 19th and early 20th centuries that audiences were persuaded to behave in a more orderly fashion. It took decades to impart a series of lessons such as “don’t talk during performances,” “don’t walk out in the middle,” and “don’t sing along with the music,” and to develop mechanisms – dimming the concert hall lights to focus attention on the performers, and providing intermissions during which the audience was allowed to talk – that encouraged compliance with these new rules.¹

Today, however, it seems that we are returning – albeit quietly – to the 19th century. Only the soft chattering of the keys or the downcast gazes of those silently thumbing their mobile phones hint that the audience’s collective attention has fragmented. From their seats in the meeting room, concert hall and classroom, formerly attentive audience members are engaged in a panoply of tasks. The ability to communicate silently via digital technology undermines the ability to detect and discipline those who wish to divide their attention. The problem with this is that, in spite of occasional claims that those now coming of age will be more adept at multitasking, our cognitive resources are quite limited. Dividing attention between tasks reduces performance.

How this will play out? Doubtless the norms that govern our behavior will shift as, at a cultural level, we grow accustomed to the ubiquity of wireless networks and the opportunities they afford. Perhaps advocates of efficiency will campaign against multi-tasking, as the 19th century arbiters of culture campaigned against disorderly audiences. Perhaps they will try to institute mechanisms to inhibit multi-tasking – blocking wireless access or providing email ‘intermissions’? I’m skeptical things will move in this direction. Instead, I believe that we’ll gradually redesign our collective interaction styles to suit a world in which the audience prefers to multi-task. Perhaps presentations will come to include frequent summaries, so that those whose attention has been elsewhere can get the gist of what they’ve missed and re-engage. Perhaps presentations will become drastically shorter, with supporting materials providing more details for those interested (to be pursued during those old-fashioned meetings that last an entire half hour). Or perhaps multi-tasking will be harnessed in the service of presentations. Imagine a meeting in which, as the speaker speaks, the audience is engaged in a multiplicity of silent conversations about the speaker’s remarks. Perhaps groups will coalesce in backchannel chat rooms as the speaker speaks – one generating references to related works, another using search engines to do on-the-fly fact checking, and a third riffing on a topic that has caught their attention. Perhaps the speaker will be complicit, suggesting topics or questions for the audience; perhaps presentation slides will be punctuated with the URLs for topic-specific chat spaces, and the presentation itself with interludes for online discussion. Perhaps, in not quite so long as we imagine, presenters will morph into something more akin to conductors or facilitators, whose success is judged not by the content presented but by their ability to produce a harmonious whole from a diverse array of participants.

All of these, or none of these, may come about, but I think it is likely that the idea of the quiet, attentive, focused audience will prove to have been a relatively brief historical curiosity. We’re all to be quiet and listen? How twentieth century!

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¹ Lawrence W. Levine. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Harvard University Press, 1988.