

From Social Content Ratings to Sentiment Analysis: The cultivation and commodification of affective television engagement

Jennifer Hessler,
University of Huddersfield, UK

Abstract:

In this article, I analyze the evolution of Nielsen's Social Content Ratings (SCRs), including their increasing amalgamation into the engagement economy. SCRs ultimately work to subordinate fans' participation to the discursive authority of marketing teams, curating fan behavior to make it more commodifiable. In this way, SCRs fit into the larger emergence of affective economies that seek to not only measure affect, but cultivate it, to take advantage of the commercial potential of emotional investment. In the second part of this article, I discuss how television producers have reframed programming around the pursuit of social buzz. I analyze three series: MTV's *The Challenge*; Freeform's *Pretty Little Liars*; and the ABC-licensed award show, *The Oscars*. Whether it be invoking viewers' investment in intra-cast feuds, engrossing fans in 'OMG' moments, or drawing fans in with viral celebrations of stardom, digital campaigns are geared toward strategically commodifying affect. Ultimately, I demonstrate how Social-TV analytics make explicit the entanglement of technology and creativity that underpin the term 'engagement'. I end by discussing the recent sale of Nielsen Social to social listening firm, Talkwalker, and what the integration of social-TV analytics and AI means for the future of engagement.

Key words: Social-TV, Social Content Ratings, Audience Measurement, Affective Engagement, Branding, Sentiment Analysis

Throughout the early part of the new millennium, audiences have increasingly turned away from linear broadcasting toward new forms of over-the-top and online engagement with television. In response, television networks and audience measurement firms are pursuing an array of strategies to re-commodify audiences while capitalizing on the new modes of participation that the internet affords. In 2013, following their purchase of social analytics

firm SocialGuide, Nielsen began releasing Twitter ratings in the United States (under the moniker Nielsen Social). They later added social engagement on Facebook (in 2016) and Instagram (in 2018) to the metric, which they renamed Social Content Ratings (SCRs) – a metric of audiences’ engagement with television shows across social media. In moving into social, Nielsen joined a competitive market of emerging social-TV analytics firms, which included Zeebox, ConnectTV, i.TV, Miso TV, Shazam, Trendrr, IntoNow, Viggie, Bluefin Labs (later bought by Twitter), and Kantar Media, among others. Yet, Nielsen’s headway into social analytics was remarkable for two reasons. With its legacy as television’s long-time audience ratings intermediary, Nielsen’s investment in social marked a formal acknowledgment of the changing look of marketable television engagement. Moreover, Nielsen’s legacy status as the industry’s go-to audience measurement firm legitimized social metrics, expediting the television industry’s recognition of their viability.

While social-TV analytics have yet to play as central of a role in the television ad buyer’s market as other metrics, they have changed the look of network/series branding, especially for series with primary audiences that are well-represented on social. Nielsen’s promotion of SCRs centered on their ability to measure more than exposure, in effect capturing the strength of a show’s brand community as well as the loyalty of its fans and their proclivity toward active engagement. In this way, SCRs fit into the larger emergence of ‘affective economies’ that seek to not only measure consumer affect/sentiment, but cultivate it via procuring engagement, to take advantage of the commercial potential of emotional investment.

The fusion of audience commodification and creative interactivity that occurs through social-TV makes it ripe for scholarly analysis. Phillip Napoli; Allie Kosterich; JP Kelly; and Darryl Woodford, Ben Goldsmith, and Axel Bruns have written about the emergence of social-TV analytics, speculating about their potential impact on long-standing audience measurement regimes. However, none of these authors focus in-depth on the evolution and cultural influence of Nielsen’s SCRs, which is an operative case study because SCRs emblemize the trajectory of institutionalization that social-TV analytics, generally, have undergone in their first decade. Another strand of scholarship has analyzed the myriad ways that fans enact agency while engaging with television on social media, including textual poaching and resistance, intervening in production, and forming identity-based communities (Arcy and Johnson; Brown; Deller; Ellcessor; Ellis; Navar-Gill and Stanfill; Selva; Williams and Gonlin; Wood). However, comparatively less scholarship has focused on how the pursuit of social buzz has shaped the television industry’s creative practice, including creative labor, branding, or programming and content creation. Existing work in this area includes Navar-Gill’s analysis of how writer’s room Twitter accounts tactically shape social media discourse in accord with branding goals, Jacinta Yander’s discussion of the role of the social media manager, and Elizabeth Evans’ examination of the policy governing the BBC’s Twitter use, in addition to an array of groundbreaking work on ABC’s ‘Thank God It’s Thursday’ Twitter promotion of Shonda Rhyme’s programming (Everett; Ingram-Waters and

Balderas; Patterson; Warner). In this article, I similarly explore this relationship between social analytics and cultural practice.

I draw on analysis of media industry trade press articles, Media Ratings Council (USA) reports and industry white papers, field work conducted at Social Media AdWeek and the Coalition for Innovative Media Management Annual Summit, and interviews with representatives from Talkwalker to analyze the evolution of SCRs, including their increasing amalgamation into the engagement economy. The methodology underpinning SCRs, what enables them to work as a currency, involves using classifiers as meta-data to re-configure and re-direct engagement toward commodifiable means. Thus, digital strategy teams work with measurement firms to create, circulate, and adjust classifiers in conjunction with their content campaigns to shape engagement. While SCRs are promoted as a response to the opportunities of convergent media and the new participatory culture it begets, they ultimately work to subordinate fans' participation to the discursive authority of marketing teams and measurement firms, curating fan behavior to make it more predictable, hierarchized, and commodifiable. Moreover, in pursuit of commodifiable audience engagement, networks have not only changed the way their content brands circulate on social, but even altered some programming formats to capitalize on the social analytics environment. Thus, in the latter part of this article, I analyze how three programming genres have re-shaped their content and brand around the pursuit of social media buzz. As a case study, SCRs make explicit the complex entanglement of the technological and creative underpinnings of the term 'engagement.'

Finally, I conclude with a (somewhat speculative) discussion of the future of SCRs as they evolve conterminously with the advanced television landscape. Having moved beyond the utility of end-of-the-day analytic reports, networks and producers care more about data tools that help them strategize social content in real-time as well as predict and track sentiment. This is, in part, what motivated Nielsen's sale of their Social arm to social listening firm, Talkwalker, in 2020. Thus, I end by discussing how the integration of SCRs and artificial intelligence (AI) exacerbates this data governed cultivation of audience interaction with programming and what it means for the future of social-TV engagement.

The Evolution of Social Content Ratings

In 2011, Nielsen reported that for the first time in 20 years the number of US households that owned a television dropped, by close to 1 million in fact, and the number of people watching in an average minute declined 3% from two years prior ('Nielsen Estimates'; Schechner; Stelter). They attributed this to younger viewers cutting their cable subscriptions in conjunction with a rise of viewing across online platforms – that same year some 143 million people watched TV on the internet (Miller; 'State of the Media'). Although Nielsen was reporting Live+3 metrics at the time (since 2009), which aggregated live viewing and three days of set-top box playback, television watched on the internet was still going uncounted. Thus, networks insisted that their audiences had not declined as drastically as the metrics indicated, they had just been displaced.

The increasingly fragmented television landscape of the 1990s motivated advertisers' interest in more varied forms of audience investment – terms like buzz, loyalty, and engagement became commonplace in television marketing. Coincidentally, the same connected landscape that drove audience decline also affords new opportunities for capturing these audience behaviors, namely through tracking social media engagement. Throughout 2011, the number of Twitter accounts increased by 100 million and the number of Tweets per day increased by 80 million, a 250% increase over the year prior (Friedlein; 'State of the Media'). Moreover, a 2011 survey by Nielsen found that 40% of people used their devices while watching TV and almost half of this so-called second-screen use involved reading/posting on social media ('40% of Tablet and Smartphone Owners').

In recognition of these new opportunities at the intersection of television viewing and social media use, Nielsen acquired social media analytics company SocialGuide in 2012. In 2013, Nielsen launched their Twitter Ratings under their Nielsen Social arm. The metric included not just the number Tweets about a given television program, but the audience of those Tweets as well. Nielsen's press report stated, 'The Twitter TV audience for an episode is, on average, 50 times larger than the authors who are generating Tweets. For example, if 2,000 people are tweeting about a program, 100,000 people are seeing those Tweets' ('Nielsen Launches Nielsen Twitter Ratings'). In 2014, Nielsen added gender, age, and race demographics to their Twitter Ratings. Since Twitter users aren't required to disclose such information upon signing up for an account, demographics were intelligence-derived – the platform used a modeled approach to assign demographics to users based on information on their public Twitter profile, such as their first name, accounts followed, and profile text ('@isaach'; Faughnder). Intelligence-derived demographics are problematic for several reasons. In addition to the general inconsistency of detecting social identity based on such things, there are certain socio-discursive and performative phenomena on social media that make it even more dubious. For example, 'digital blackface', where social media users adopt a Black vernacular in their posts, memes, images, etc., as well as even more sinister instances of non-Black or non-female users deceptively creating profiles intended to appear as though they belong to Black or female users as a round-about way of participating in racist/misogynistic harassment, make intelligence-derived demographics highly dubious (Jackson; Sobande).

Nielsen promoted Twitter Ratings as supplementary to traditional live ratings, a rhetorical move that, as Kosterich and Napoli (264) explain, enabled Nielsen to incorporate social-TV analytics (to avoid competing with them) while also preserving the primacy of traditional ratings. Discussion in the industry trade press centered on whether strong social media engagement could predict ratings success or boost a series' ratings. For example, regarding teen programming, a genre that was among the hardest hit by the decline of linear viewing but successful at garnering social media engagement, trade press contrasted the way that the Twitter ratings success of both Freeform's *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017) and MTV's *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017) translated in their respective traditional ratings. *Pretty Little Liars* was the most tweeted about show in 2013 with 2.6 million unique social media

users sending out over 11.7 million Tweets (Gilman). The show's August 2013 mid-season finale set a record for the top-tweeted episode of any series on television up to that date. Ultimately, *Pretty Little Liars'* social media buzz was deemed partially responsible for its ratings growth during its fourth season, up an average of 400,000 viewers from the season prior (Jurgensen). On the other hand, success in the Twitter Ratings did not do as much for *Teen Wolf*. For its Season 4 premiere, *Teen Wolf* was the number 1 rated show on social media with 130,000 unique Tweets and 1.2 million total tweets (Wagmeister). But while the season 4 premiere scored a 3.6 Nielsen Live+SD rating, by the end of Season 5, the Live+SD rating dropped to a .37. The show's declining ratings factored into MTV's decision to not renew the show for a seventh season (Prudom). In hopes of piquing the industry's further interest in the correlation between social buzz and traditional ratings, in 2013 Nielsen published the results of study analyzing the minute-to-minute correlation between live TV ratings and Tweets for 221 primetime programs. One of their findings (which should be read partially as promotional tactic) was that a spike in a series' traditional ratings often increased the volume of tweets, and conversely, a spike in tweets for a series often encouraged more people to tune in ('New Nielsen Research Indicates').

Nielsen Social operated within a burgeoning market of social-TV analytics firms during this period. Social analytics firms rely on scraping data from social media application programming interfaces (APIs), which store a backlog of readily accessible data that has become increasingly advanced over the past decade. But throughout the first half of the 2010s, social-TV firms relied on a myriad of scraping methods and disparate algorithms for sorting and interpreting results. In fact, Napoli's (126-130) 2014 analysis of three social-TV analytics firms found that there was little consistency in their results, which he identifies as one of the reasons that television networks and advertisers were slow to buy into social metrics.

In 2015, the MRC, the United States' independent audience measurement accreditation board, released official guidelines for social media measurement, which helped to legitimize social-TV metrics. The MRC guidelines also reified the relations of (in this case discursive) power between producers and consumers. For example, the MRC guidelines advised analytics firms to distinguish between categories of authorship and engagement, with the latter being defined as, 'A spectrum of consumer activities and experiences (interactions and interest) – cognitive, emotional, and physical. Engagement assumes active participation, but may also describe a cognitive or emotional connection, in addition to a physical action' ('MRC Social Media Measurement Guidelines'). In respect to analytics, the guidelines further break engagement down into three sub-categories: (1) Interaction, (2) Content Redistribution, and (3) Advocacy and Influence. Thus, the guidelines further institutionalized SCRs within the engagement economy while materializing (invisible) hierarchies of discourse owners and participants.

The following year, in 2016, Nielsen added Facebook data to its Twitter ratings, renaming (the newly MRC-accredited) metrics Social Content Ratings (SCR), and in 2018 Nielsen incorporated Instagram interactions into the metric. In accord with the guidelines

set by the MCR, Nielsen's SCRs differentiate between owned content (Nielsen originally tracked 44,000 accounts associated with networks or production teams) and organic content (posts created by fans). The SCRs also track 'Uniques', social media accounts that have authored original content related to a linear TV episode; 'Interactions', the engagement with that original posts and content; and 'Impressions', the frequency that unique and interactive posts are seen ('Social Content Ratings'; 'Nielsen's Social Content Ratings').

SCRs rely on millions of 'classifiers', which are program-related terms, including accounts, handles, and talent names as well as hashtags and other phrases associated with the series that are created or identified and circulated by the digital strategy team. These classifiers are systematically tracked during a program's airing and after, essentially operating as meta-data to re-configure and re-direct engagement toward commodifiable means. In reality, classifiers serve numerous purposes. They not only prompt fans to weigh in, but they (to use the language that Pridmore and Trottier use when describing social media marketing tactics) enact a 'brand audience', (135) framing the tone/vernacular of discourse and prioritizing some conversations over others. Classifiers also enable television networks and Nielsen to track and tally social conversations while disguising such surveillance mechanisms within normalized features of people's everyday use of social media like hashtags and handles.

Nielsen's 2016 acquisition of Gracenote, an automated content recognition system, increased the range of real-time social analytics that they could offer to clients. By 2018, Nielsen Social tracked over 1,400 series and special programs, on both linear and streaming sites such as Netflix and Hulu, as well as over 2,000 brands and theatrical release movies, all on a 24/7-basis across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Nielsen 2017 Annual Report). Clients had access to the real-time analytics via a syndicated dashboard in addition to select commissioned intel. This was all in addition to the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual SCRs that Nielsen released to the press.

While Nielsen's intent to differentiate between owned content and organic content was core to its SCR methodology, in actuality, the design of social media platforms' APIs made it nearly impossible for the firm to capture the whole production-owned ecosystem across all social media sites; that was until 2019, when Instagram instituted a new designation for so-called creator accounts and made them measurable via its Graph API. Shortly after, Nielsen started tracking Instagram talent accounts, which are released as a separate metric and also integrated into standard SCR measurement. According to Nielsen, talent-owned accounts typically generate around 60% of the engagement with a show ('Instagram Measurement Now Available'). Data from 2018 showed that over 6,000 talent accounts created over 164,000 posts, resulting in over 170 million engagements for TV programs ('Star Power'). In their press release for the initiative, Nielsen included a statement by J.R. Griffin of FremantleMedia, the company that produces *America's Got Talent* (NBC, 2016-) and *American Idol* (ABC, 2002): 'We work with our talent to create extremely high levels of social engagement that keep our fans connected to these brands.'

By leveraging Nielsen's [SCRs], we are able to accurately measure our talent's social influence and refine our strategies in real-time in order to create the most impactful campaigns' ('Star Power'). Since many talent contracts now include social media promotion clauses, Nielsen's creator account metrics enable producers to better capitalize on their investment in talent. But moreover, Griffin's mentions of real-time strategizing and tailoring gesture toward the growing utility of SCRs in the advanced television landscape.

For the past few years, the industry trade press has regularly published weekly SCRs alongside Live+7 ratings with no need to address correlation between the two, a sign that SCRs have evolved beyond their origin as mere reinforcement for linear ratings. In fact, in an advanced television landscape, SCRs have several advantages. First, SCRs are inherently a cross-platform currency, meaning advertisers can readily compare the social buzz of a network-distributed series to that of streaming platforms' original series – *This Is Us* (NBC, 2016-) to *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016-), for example. And second, new cloud-based content recognition and real-time response software in conjunction with advancements to APIs make social-TV analytics apt for minute-by-minute content strategizing. As I discuss in the next section, alongside the evolving utility of SCRs, some of the genres of programming that rely most on generating social buzz to replace ever-shrinking linear ratings have also changed the way they conceptualize audience engagement with their series, the forms of marketing they use, and even the conventions or content of their series.

Affective Economies and Programming for Social Buzz

Since the fragmentation of the television landscape in the late 20th-century, the television industry has increasingly leaned into manufacturing emotional connection to program brands to procure audience loyalty. Henry Jenkins points out that this aligned with a growing interest in 'affective economies' – marketing approaches that recognize the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as the driving force behind consumer decisions – across the consumer marketing industry more generally (20). The notion that affective attachment motivates everything from what series viewers watch to what brands they identify with drives the television industry's interest in measuring as well as actively cultivating or directing sentiment. Jenkins examines how the increasing convergence of television and the internet throughout the early 2000s created new ways for audience participation to be directly commodified, pointing to the rise of reality-TV formats – such as *American Idol* or *Big Brother* (CBS, 2000-) – that encouraged viewers to (pay money to) vote for their favorite contestants or purchase merchandise such as music singles or props from the show (61-64).

The rise of social media has generated a more digitally-savvy iteration of affective economies – what marketing professionals call the 'engagement economy'. This term is used to describe both the nature of the highly networked digital consumption environment and the tactics required to capitalize on it – including relying on social analytics, partnering with influencers, and encouraging prosumption – to cultivate consumers' personal connection with and loyalty to brands. To understand the nature of engagement in the

social-TV landscape, one must look at the interaction between emerging tools of measurement and commodification, textual practices, and audience interactivity.

While the full utility of social-TV analytics to ad buyers has yet to be realized, television producers and programmers have taken their cues from the marketing industry more generally and utilized social media to manufacture online engagement economies around their series. In the following subsections, I will analyze how three programs in three different genres – MTV’s reality-TV show, *The Challenge* (1998-); ABC Family/Freeform’s teen drama, *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017); and the currently ABC-licensed annual award show, *The Oscars* – have created digital content strategies with the intention of generating affect and achieving success in the SCRs. Whether it be invoking viewers’ investment in intra-cast feuds or playing on their enjoyment of hate-viewing, emotionally engrossing fans in the suspense of ‘OMG’ moments, or drawing fans in with spontaneity and star power, contemporary digital campaign are geared toward strategically commodifying affect. To achieve this, networks’ digital strategists develop paratextual programming to elongate a series’ window of engagement, run interactive campaigns of teasers and (cliff) hangers, encourage intra-cast interactions and opportunities for fans to interact with talent, and adopt a strategically configured fan vernacular. In each case, the re-configuration of digital campaigns to capitalize on measurable social engagement has altered the transtextual properties and themes of these series while also motivating new modes of fan production.

Paratextual social feuds in The Challenge

To both augment and capitalize on their commodifiable social engagement some networks have taken to extending their live window with paratextual reunions, after shows, or recaps that draw directly on social media engagement. In 2016, new president of MTV, Chris McCarthy, was tasked with revitalizing the network by bringing in new creative talent, re-engineering some of the network’s staple shows, and devising strategies to enhance social media engagement. *The Challenge*, a competition-based reality show and one of MTV’s highest rated series, has become an operative case study in capitalizing on social engagement. The cast of *The Challenge* are active on Twitter throughout the airing of the season, responding to events as they unfold and quarreling with other cast members. In addition to increasing engagement during the live airing, the social media exchanges provide content for weekly aftershows that are posted on MTV.com and also for the live-televised reunion show. *The Challenge* and the earlier MTV series that it spun-off from, *The Real World* (1992-) and *Road Rules* (1995-2007), have long held reunion episodes at the end of each season. However, incorporating social media interactions as a main focus of discussion has redefined the nature of these post-finale episodes. On a very fundamental level, recently, the reunion episodes have spanned two full hours over the course of two weeks. Ahead of the reunion, the cast use social media posts to procure live viewers for the episode – such as when cast member Cara Maria posted ahead of the Season 30 reunion: ‘I will see you all at the reunion with my giant pot of piping tea ready to spill’. Similarly, ahead of the Season 32 reunion, cast member Amanda tweeted, ‘Just wait for the bomb we are dropping

at the reunion...Your secret is getting exposed hunnnny'. These Twitter teases of impending drama are then invoked in MTV's official promotions of the episode. Moreover, this notice that intra-cast social media quarrels will be discussed during the reunion encourage fans to follow (or engage with) the cast on social media to obtain insider insight into the drama. During the Season 31 'Vendettas' reunion, host (and former cast-member turned pro-wrestler) Mike 'The Miz' Mizanin leads into a segment about so-called 'beef' between two castmates, Britney and Marie, by saying, 'These two have been hating all over each other. You want proof? Check out these Tweets'. The Miz then reads a series of insulting, back-and-forth tweets between the two cast members. The cast members are invited to explain or defend their tweets, providing more context about the conflict. The most recent Season 36 'Double Agents' reunion interspersed segments where cast members were 'compromised,' meaning one of their recent drama-imbued social media posts play on the screen and they are asked to 'defend' it. One segment shows cast member Amber M.'s tweet, 'How am I being called a layup by people who haven't even won a challenge? #MakeltMakeSense'. Host, Vernon Davis, turns to another cast member: 'Fessy, you replied 'Cause you are,' but later deleted your response. Why?' The exchange is used to draw out the festering conflict between the season's rookie players. Throughout the reunion episodes, the casts' social media posts are used to transition between topics and incorporate new content, enabling the reunion episode to move the conversation beyond what aired live.

Twitter feuds are also incorporated into the main show. After Season 34, cast-members Kayleigh and Melissa tweeted rumors about another member of the cast, Kailah, cheating on her boyfriend during shooting. The rumors were brought up during Season 34's reunion episode, eventually culminating in a physical fight in the following Season 35, which resulted in both Melissa and Kailah's removal from the show. In another example, ahead of Season 32, cast member Kayleigh outed another member of the cast, Natalie, as pansexual via Instagram, and this became a prominent storyline throughout the season. In fact, these (sometimes manufactured) social media feuds, meant to generate social engagement, have shaped the textual themes of the show – multiple seasons have centered on pairing contestants up as 'Rivals' or 'Vendettas' or revitalizing past intra-cast betrayals through seasons themed 'Dirty 30' and 'Final Reckoning'. Social media interactions are central to these feuds. In fact, in Season 31 'Vendettas', multiple contestants paired up as vendettas had never interacted in real life and had only engaged in back-and-forth insults over social media.

These intra-cast social media conflicts seem organic, extending the 'reality' of reality-tv drama into real life, in essence expanding the diegesis of the show. In reality, the cast knows that having a robust (and entertaining) social media presence will increase their chance of being cast on future seasons. Co-creator Jonathan Murray explains of MTV's casting decisions, 'We're aware of things like their Twitter wars with other regular Challenge cast members. We know that when they arrive, they're going to have to defend those

words' (Greene). Thus, social media feuds provide additional drama for the series and make those cast members involved more valuable to the series.

On the one hand, the incorporation of social media engagement into the aftershows and reunion episodes, in turn, further encourages fans to follow and interact with cast members or post about *The Challenge* in hopes that their question or critique might invoke a response. On the other hand, the intra-cast Twitter feuds also fuel hate watching or anti-fandom, which Jonathan Gray, Melissa A. Click, and Emily Nussbaum have described as a perverse form of enjoyment that has been further flamed by the popularity of social media. In addition to supporting their favorite so-called challengers, social media-engaged viewers can also hate-tweet the challengers who they dislike. In the eyes of the SCRs, all engagement is good engagement. That is why MTV encourages intra-cast social media feuds to procure social media engagement for many of its reality-TV series, including *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012, 2018-), *Catfish* (2012-), *Teen Mom* (multiple iterations 2009-), *Are You The One?* (2014-), and *Ex On The Beach* (USA version 2018-), among others. But *The Challenge* is perhaps the most successful series at cultivating high-impression social media drama. Since 2017, *The Challenge* has achieved relatively consistent ratings growth and strong performance in the SCRs. The most recently finished iteration, Season 35, premiered at 1.14 Live+SD rating in the 18-49 demographic, its best premiere showing in eight years, and ranked 2nd across all programming in the SCRs (Petski). *The Challenge's* robust social media presence is part of the reason Viacom/CBS created *The Challenge: All Stars* (2021-), an alternative iteration of the series featuring 'old school' players returned from retirement, for the launch of its streaming service Paramount+.

The interactive digital campaigns of Pretty Little Liars

Other networks have relied on tactics such as creating campaigns around teasers, hangers, and key plot moments. Perhaps one of the most successful series to capitalize on the opportunities of social media campaigns and SCRs was Freeform's (previously ABCFamily) *Pretty Little Liars*. The series was Nielsen's champion for demonstrating how social metrics can enhance a series' staying power and ability to attract advertisers. The production team for *Pretty Little Liars* accomplished this by creating para-textual material to generate fan interactivity that was classified in ways that could easily be detected by Nielsen. Ahead of each season, digital strategists designated a range of teasers and hangers that could be promoted on social media to generate buzz and entice fans to tune in for the live viewing – in particular, with the promise that the foreshadowed narrative event would garner live interaction. Digital strategists identified key moments in the plot that were likely to elicit fan response, which they designate 'OMG' moments (another series, Fox's *Empire*, used an edgier label: 'WTF' moments); they also developed a range of talent engagement opportunities, memes and gifs, and phrases and hashtags to represent these moments which were designated as classifiers.

In one example, the digital strategy team used a teaser campaign to tip fans off that the series' anonymous villain called 'A' would be unmasked during the Season 2 finale,

suitably titled 'unmAsked'. A classifier, #ADay, was created, where fans chimed in with guesses about who 'A' might be, which they updated in real-time as the episode aired. The campaign set a Twitter ratings record for 2012, procuring 32,000 tweets during the minute the reveal happened and 645,000 engagements for the hour. The series' social media team ran a similar campaign for the Season 4 mid-season finale, teasing that the re-incarnated 'A' would, once again, be revealed. The OMG moment was designated the classifier #WorldWarA. At the end of the episode, it was revealed that Ezra, the love interest of one of the main characters, Aria, (and also her former teacher) could be 'A'. Upon the reveal, two additional production-created classifiers trended worldwide: 'Pretty Little Liars' and 'Ezra Is A'. In fact, these two classifiers trended for 24-hours after the program's airing. In effort to extend social engagement with the series far beyond the live window and keep the cliff-hanger alive throughout the series' five-month intermission, the digital strategy team asked fans to upload pictures and videos of their reactions to watching the moment unfold live on television to Facebook, which the digital team eventually compiled into a digital mosaic of Ezra. In the *Shorty Award* entry for the campaign, the digital strategy team wrote:

After previous big reveals on the show, we noticed a trend among fans in the social media space – they loved sharing photos of their reactions. To capitalize on this organic trend during the #WorldWarA episode, we ran an on-air snipe telling fans to get ready to tweet their reaction photos around the big #WorldWarA reveal for a chance to have their photo featured in a digital mosaic on the Pretty Little Liars Facebook page. Finally, when the beloved character named Ezra was revealed to be the evil character A, we saw an explosion in the social media space with scores of fans tweeting their reaction photos using #PLLReaction. (Entry for 'Pretty Little Liars #TheBetrayal Campaign')

The entry emphasized the key strengths of the campaign as being its responsiveness to fan input and opportunities for interactivity, while also emphasizing the digital content teams' 'awareness' and 'successful response'. When Season 4 returned, it was made evident that Ezra is not in fact 'A,' but the series capitalized on the fans' cascade of emotional responses to the character's up and down storyline again in the final moments of the Season 4 finale in 2014, when Ezra was shot while trying to reveal 'A's' identity. Once again, his fate was left unknown – a hanger that was designated with the producer-created classifier: #IsEzraAlive. This classifier garnered 1.45 million engagements, *Pretty Little Liars'* highest tweet volume for the year, and the finale as a whole garnered the highest SCR of any series up to that date.

To create campaigns that seem authentic and cultivate social engagement that feels like the fans' own, the digital strategy team aimed to replicate a fan vernacular. This vernacular was partially manufactured by the marketing team. Beyond cultivating fans' experience of 'insider status,' the production team promoted brand-bonding by creating a

shared identity around the series and its social community. The shared vernacular of *Pretty Little Liars*' brand could best be characterized as hyperbolic, slightly rebellious and sexy, and youthful-spirited. For a start, the official social media accounts referred to the fans with the aliases that the fandom gave itself, such as 'The Liars' and 'The PLLArmy'. Additionally, classifiers used lively but simple and clear phrasing, while posts from owned accounts replicated the playful puns used in episode titles and featured exclamation marks and emojis to emulate a teenage-like rhetorical style. Visual promotional materials maintained the gothic feminine aesthetic of the series – using color schemes of bright pinks and reds paired with dark grays and black, for example. Finally, part of adequately replicating a fan vernacular includes digital literacy – knowing *how* fans like to use various social media platforms. For the *Pretty Little Liars* digital strategy team, this included using Twitter for live updates and real-time interactions, Instagram for behind-the-scenes photos, and Tumblr for fan-created content (Ng). All these strategies cultivated a brand for the show and gave the fandom 'an identity,' creating an emotional bond between fans and the series.

On the other hand, as the aforementioned #WorldWarA campaign exemplified, the fans also established their own norms of behavior which were then, reciprocally, incorporated into future campaigns. One such example was the fandom's interest in participating in the 'mystery' components of the series, often discussing clues or 'easter eggs' from the episode and debating the identity of the series' anonymous villains with other fans on social media. Ultimately, the digital strategy team ended up capitalizing on this proclivity in their campaigns, creating more investigation-themed paratextual content. In 2011, the digital campaign team launched an 'A Is Everywhere' contest that invited fans to post pictures of random, peculiar sighting of the letter 'A' that they come across in their real lives to a Facebook app for the chance to win a visit to the *Pretty Little Liars* set. The photos uploaded included such things as a donut peculiarly shaped as the letter 'A,' an 'A'-shaped image of the Eiffel tower, a body scar in the shape of the letter 'A,' and a group of friends who had arranged their bodies to create a letter 'A' in the grass. The app generated 2.32 million views and 4,975 submissions. Further, in another campaign for the Season 3 mid-season finale, the digital strategy team teased the reveal of a betrayal (with the classifier #TheBetrayal) from within the inner circle of the main female characters. Integrating the fans' desire to take on the role of investigators, the production team released an interactive suspect tracker app on Facebook that allowed viewers to vote on the betrayer's identity. The digital strategy team then narrowed down 'The Betrayer' list to 12 suspects and encouraged fans to tweet their vote for who was guilty of the ultimate betrayal (Entry for 'Pretty Little Liars #WorldWarA Campaign'). Thus, part of the fan vernacular, cultivated collaboratively between the production teams and the fans, included a social proclivity toward investigation, clue-finding, and secret reveals, all practices that are inherently engaging and participatory, giving fans the feeling of being 'insiders'. But while *Pretty Little Liars* branded itself as being uniquely interested in fan input, in reality, the network's goal was to strategically package new forms of quantifiable and commodifiable viewer engagement as part of the normative television viewing experience.

In addition to its impact on transtextual meaning and fan interactivity, the pursuit of success in the SCRs affects the labor of production. To get these campaigns started and keep them going the production staff employed at least ten live tweeters per episode. *Pretty Little Liars* Executive Producer, Joseph Dougherty, explained that the talent and writing staff are also given ‘a digital asset package’ before each episode ‘with suggestions for what they might like to post along with photos and clips should they want to use it’ (Ng). While the casts’ involvement in procuring social media engagement has been central to both *The Challenge* and *Pretty Little Liars*, the different expectations for the two casts reflect the power hierarchies of above-the-line and below-the-line labor. Dougherty expressed that the talent on *Pretty Little Liars* were not required to be involved at all times nor to reveal aspects of their personal lives. But on *The Challenge*, the castmates’ season-by-season jobs are potentially at stake if they do not procure enough social media engagement, and their personal lives seem to be fair game in the series’ pursuit of higher SCRs.

Ultimately, for its strategic cultivation of social media engagement, *Pretty Little Liars* ranked among the Top-10 programs in the SCRs during all but the last year of its airing, and the series was a regular awardee at the Shortys, an annual award show recognizing the people and organizations that produce short-form content across social media. In addition, the buzz and fan loyalty cultivated by the series’ social media campaigns was also the catalyst for a range of synergistic products, such as extending the original book series by Sara Shephard of the same name from eight to sixteen books; numerous ancillary product lines, including a fashion line with Aeropostale; and successful iTunes releases of music featured on the series. Other dramas such as *Empire* (Fox, 2015-2020), *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-), *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-2022), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019), and *Orange Is The New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019) have also maintained consistently high ratings in the SCRs (and also similar success with ancillary products) by cultivating similar interactive social media campaigns.

Viral gifs extend the life of The Oscars

Just as dramatic series have endeavored to offset their ratings decline by investing in their social metrics, so too have live programming genres, such as sports broadcasts and award shows. In the case of awards shows, the strategy is less about creating long-lasting buzz or fan loyalty and more about creating short-term reach and virality. Despite long being known for attracting an older demographic, *The Oscars* have rated surprisingly high among younger audiences in the SCRs. The 2019 show generated 17.7 million interactions across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which was almost double the amount of social media posts about *The Golden Globes* and *The Emmys* (‘Tops of 2019: Social TV’). The 2020 show generated 20.5 million interactions, ranking fourth in the SCRs below the MTV *Video Music Awards*, the *American Music Awards*, and *The Grammys* (‘Best of Social TV 2020’).

While production teams for dramatic series plan campaigns in advance, identifying key plot moments and designating a range of classifiers that can be promoted on social media, for live events, digital strategists must be ready to respond with content in real-time.

To accomplish this, the network of license (which has been ABC since 1976) and The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences establish partnerships with companies like Giphy, who are licensed to redistribute content from the telecast. As part of the agreement, close to a dozen Giphy workers cut excerpts from the live feed, convert them into GIFs and memes, and upload them within 5-minutes to the Giphy platform and to other prominent social media sites. According to journalist John Jurgenson, ‘The company pumped out 598 GIFs during [2020’s] three-hour telecast (including a moment shared by Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper), up from 333 the year before’ (Jergensen). Additionally, ABC employs armies of live-Tweeters who create and share content from the broadcast in effort to make it go viral and procure engagement. However, there are some pre-planned moments staged between ABC and the show’s advertisers in hopes that they’ll go viral – most famously, the celebrity-filled selfie that host Ellen DeGeneres orchestrated during the 2014 broadcast using a phone from major sponsor, Samsung. That tweet became the most retweeted post ever at that time, and it helped *The Oscars* rank first in Nielsen’s Twitter ratings for ‘Specials’ that year with over 11,000 original Tweets and 1 billion impressions (Spanger; ‘Tops of 2014: Social TV’).

Unlike the strategically crafted and carefully planned interactive campaigns of *Pretty Little Liars*, success in the SCRs for *The Oscars* means provoking social media engagements from pre-planned talent presentations and collaborations while also capitalizing on random off-the-cuff moments, unexpected mistakes, or spontaneous displays of emotion. These unforeseen moments are what can make or break *The Oscar’s* success on social media. For example, in 2017 a shot of actress Nicole Kidman palm-clapping in a very peculiar manner sparked social engagement, becoming one of most-viewed *Oscar* gifs of all time. Other unplanned moments like celebrity interactions, emotionally potent acceptance speeches or calls to social action, surprising first wins or unexpected upsets, and back-stage Oscar name-engravings are the occasions that social strategy teams endeavor to make viral. As Sadie Novello, Giphy’s chief content officer explains, ‘It’s not usually the highly polished moments that take off on the secondary market of social media... [it’s the] tiny, nuanced moments that convey emotion’ (Jergensen). Different from the well-crafted campaigns for dramatic series, what drives SCR success for live specials is the unpredictable moments that fans can respond to (with others on social media) in real-time. In fact, it is the spontaneity of gif and meme virality that encourages audiences to watch live.

Still, at other times The Academy’s digital content partners and the armies of owned accounts employed to cultivate engagement try to be operative in shaping the tone of online discourse. During the 2017 ceremony, *La La Land* was incorrectly announced as the winner of the capstone Best Picture award instead of the actual winner *Moonlight*, a snafu that sparked ~140,000 tweets in a minute (Jergensen). Not only were dozens of gifs of the moment released on Giphy, but the Oscars also hired graphic designer, Julie Winegard, specifically to create an animated gif that captured the best nature of the moment. The strategy that goes into such a gif design is evident in the rationale for its Shorty awards entry: ‘When Best Picture was wrongly awarded, it was clear this was the pivotal moment.

While there were many aspects on what led to the mix up, we chose to focus on the camaraderie displayed when [Jordan] Horowitz handed [Barry] Jenkins, his friend, the award. We felt the story could be told in three key frames and Julie quickly began illustrating the moments and animated them together' (Entry for 'The Oscars 2017'; 'There's been a mistake') In essence, Winegard's gif works to recast the moment: not a mistake that revealed the temperamental labor and general fragility underpinning the polished show, but a moment of professional comradery between fellow artists – much more in line with *The Oscar's* brand. The case of Winegard's gif demonstrates the essential role that owned accounts play in not just participating in social discussion as it unfolds organically, but actually re-directing the discourse and agenda setting to (as much as possible) keep engagement positive and in accord with the award show's brand. That extraordinary moment, among others, helped boost *The Oscars* to second among 'Specials' in the SCRs for 2017, with over 22,000 interactions, second to only *The Grammys* (Cohen).

In reality, ABC, The Academy, and sponsors undertake substantial planning to help manufacture these 'organic' moments, create and mobilize digital content, and then make sure it is easily captured by Nielsen. Similar to the aforementioned reality-TV and dramatic programs, award shows like *The Oscars* have a distinct fan vernacular (and, in particular, a distinct social media engagement vernacular, which might be different from that of the typical-linear broadcast audience). The tone of social engagement with *The Oscars* leans heavily into 'quick wit and fluency with references' but also a celebration of stardom in all of its idiosyncrasies and extravagances. Thus, the digital strategy team behind *The Oscars* tend to designate specific awards, movie titles, or celebrity names as classifiers, which enables owned content to be easily found and key moments to trended.

Digital Age Audiencehood and Social Engagement

While social engagement is associated with things like buzz and virality that seem like organic manifestations of audience taste and agency, in reality, producers engage in tactical strategies and well-crafted campaigns to procure such engagement and make sure that it is easily captured by social analytics firms. Television producers, especially those working in programming formats that have been hit hardest by decline of linear television viewing, are re-directing audience engagement toward the pursuit of measurable social buzz and, in the process, altering the transtextual properties of their series. This has included adding paratextual content, leaning in to hate-viewing, relying more heavily on narrative teasers or cliffhangers, deriving more emotionally manipulative plot structures, or meme-ify key moments of their programs. These strategies not only capitalize on audience's natural emotional responses, but also inform the amount of attention and affective investment that viewers put into designated moments of the show.

The pursuit of SCRs has also motivated the addition of social media engagement clauses to casts' contracts (at other times, the expectations around casts' social media engagement are left more implicit) as well as new industry partnerships between networks, platforms, and sponsorship. Moreover, in order to measure social conversation, networks

and advertisers work with audience measurement firms to designate a wide range of classifiers, including key phrases, talent names, and hashtags under which to corral discourse. These classifiers organize conversation around certain topics or talent in ways that seem organic but are actually manufactured. Thus, the tactical databasing of discourse becomes hierarchical, a top-down structure deriving from the production team. Moreover, the emphasis on ‘owned’ content and ‘influence’ – which is informed by how the MRC guidelines articulate the top-down dynamics of engagement as well as the rise of industry awards for strategic digital campaigns – rewards producers’ ability to shape or re-direct online engagement.

But while my goal is to push back against the uncritical audience-empowerment marketing rhetoric that producers invoke to procure fan involvement, I also do not mean to disregard the ways that the industry’s pursuit of social analytics has enlivened new modes of audience agency. In the pursuit of SCRs, digital strategy teams encourage audience input and fan production – from the hate-watchers of reality-TV, to the artistic work submitted to *Pretty Little Liars*’ campaigns, and the creation of award show memes and gifs. Despite their commercial incentivization, these opportunities can lead to more social, intellectually engaged, and technologically savvy modes of fandom.

Moreover, SCRs give greater regard to certain demographic groups that have historically gone under-counted by traditional Nielsen ratings but are well-represented on social media, such as youth audiences and Black audiences. Scholars have written about ABC’s ‘Thank God It’s Thursday’ prime-time programming block of ‘diversely casted’ (a notion which Kristen Warner’s book, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV*, complicates) dramas produced by Shonda Rhymes – *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-), *Scandal* (2012-2018), and *How To Get Away With Murder* (2014-2020) – as exemplar of how these new proclivities toward capitalizing on social media buzz combined with increasing interest in multicultural audience markets have influenced programming (Everett; Ingram-Waters and Balderas; Patterson; Warner). ABC uses the moniker #TGIT to create a social media brand for the block, simultaneously generating and classifying social engagement, which is propelled by talent accounts, including Rhymes and producer Betsy Beers as well as the show leads Ellen Pompeo, Kerry Washington, and Viola Davis, live-tweeting and interacting with fans during the live-airing and answering questions on classifiers such as #AskScandal or #AskKerry. Rhymes’ shows, along with other series with significant Black viewership such as *Empire* (for example, around two-thirds of *Empire* viewers were Black) and *Atlanta* (FX, 2016-) have consistently topped the SCRs for the past five years (Kissell). These networks’ promises to enhance the diversity of their talent and programming (even if, largely unmet) have been motivated, at least in part, by new capabilities of commodifying interactivity and loyalty as well as the more granular capabilities of digital audience measurement.

These programming initiatives and their social-TV communities have been valuable in some ways. Warner; Apryl Williams and Vanessa Gonlin; and Ashna Ali and Yelizaveta Shapiro have demonstrated that #TGIT Twitter has been a productive space for complex interrogations of Black, female intersectionality, while Mark P. Orbe and Melissa Ames have

analyzed the #TGIT Twitter community's discussion of other topics related to Black identity and sexuality, public health, or the criminal justice system. But while it's easy to find fan empowerment in these liminal space of collective intelligence and co-creation, Ingram-Waters and Balderas remind us that, 'Producers largely set the terms for social television-based fan practices and thus...arguably benefit more than fans do from what seems like an empowering position for fans' (200). The benefit for producers is that, fans, in using associated classifiers, are performing labor on behalf of the network to help construct the programming segment's brand of social relevancy, promote the shows, and generate its commodifiable social buzz. Even when fans create their own hashtags – such as Ingram-Waters and Balderas example of fans trending the hashtag #DieJakeDie as a resistance to the production team's classifier #SaveJake? (207) – these still get adopted as classifiers. Thus, such fan-initiated re-appropriation of classifiers constitutes an active process of group-identity cultivation or textual resistance (which are valuable), but not necessarily commercial resistance. The stakes of these online spaces – where opportunities for Black fan engagement must exist alongside the commodification of Black consumption – is the reason why *how* (the methods via which) social conversation is generated and measured must be continuously interrogated. As I will discuss in the next section, the social analytics industry's integration with AI adds further asymmetries of power to these regimes of audience commodification (and makes them more difficult to recognize).

Sentiment Analysis, Predictive Analytics, and The Future of Social Audience Intelligence

In addition to considering how existing methodologies for commodifying social engagement structure the relations of power between producers and audiences, we must also contend with how new AI tools reify these dynamics. While SCRs have developed over the years to become more comprehensive and responsive to a digital environment, most clients now want more versatile real-time tools that will help them strategize social content minute-by-minute. While Nielsen's advancements in real-time response software for linear television would make concurrent investment in real-time social seem rational, the firm has been in a period of restructuring for the past year, where it has enacted a range of cost-cutting divestments, which CEO David Kenny describes as a move to, '[ensure] our resource allocation aligns with high-margin essential services' ('Restructuring Activities'). Because of its lower revenue point, Nielsen offloaded its Social arm to Talkwalker, which already possessed the means to make the necessary advancements to SCRs ('Talkwalker acquires Nielsen Social').

Talkwalker is an AI-enabled social listening platform, with a global clientele of over 2,000 agencies, brands, and content producers. With the acquisition of Nielsen Social, Talkwalker aims to rebrand the SCRs around more sentiment-oriented social-TV measurement, employing a new range of data visualization and conversation cluster tools. The most significant advantages that Talkwalker has over Nielsen are threefold. First, in

addition to worded classifiers, Talkwalker has the ability to detect and sort visual metadata, enabling clients to commodify a wider range of unstructured qualitative data. The promotional material for Talkwalker's image recognition technology states, 'Today, 80% of social posts contain images. Building an effective social strategy is impossible without image recognition... With Talkwalker, you can uncover business opportunities through visual insights on your brand logo, scenes and objects' ('Powerful Image Recognition'). This advancement is key for a program like *The Oscars* that organizes its digital campaign around largely visual content. Talkwalker also offers a much wider array of insights to clients. Beyond measuring merely *how much* is being said, as the SCRs have done thus far, Talkwalker gives networks and advertisers tools to measure the sentiment of audience's social engagement with television, which purportedly can even detect nuances of irony and sarcasm. And third, Talkwalker provides predictive analytics about how social sentiment will develop in response to digital content strategies.

In their recent release of 2020's annual SCRs, Talkwalker released Top-10 metrics for 'Top Scripted Series,' 'Top Premium Cable Series,' 'Most Talked About Streaming Original Series,' 'Top TV Special,' 'Top Sports Events,' and others, which is similar to what Nielsen has traditionally released at year's end. But in addition to these metrics, Talkwalker released a range of sentiment visualization. For example, among some of the samples they posted, an emoji theme cloud demonstrates that the most frequently used emojis in posts about *Supernatural* (The WB, 2005-2006; The CW, 2006-2020) include: 'Loudly Crying Face,' 'Grimacing Face,' 'Red Heart,' 'Skull,' 'Black Heart,' and 'Superhero,' among others (official emoji names taken from [emojipedia.org](https://www.emojipedia.org)). In theory, such a theme map would be used to detect a fan vernacular – the prominent inclusion of skull, ghost, black heart, zombie, vampire, and superhero emojis within the theme map would, for example, indicate *Supernatural* fans' particular connection to the dark-themes and supernatural elements of the show. Another visualization released by Talkwalker maps the emotional reactions to *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E Network, 2006-2021) over the course of the fall 2020 season. The map reveals that 'love,' 'anger,' and 'joy' were the most detected emotions from social media posts, and that they peaked in proportion in mid-November and mid-December. Another sentiment analysis for *Miss Americana* (Netflix, 2020), a documentary about American pop singer Taylor Swift, demonstrates that a main descriptor used to praise the documentary was 'vulnerable'. And finally, another graph shows that the sentiment around *Da 5 Bloods* (Netflix, 2020) proved to be consistently positive apart from a period of two-weeks following the death of one of its stars, Chadwick Boseman ('Best of Social TV 2020').

My purpose in detailing this range of Talkwalker's sentiment maps is not to celebrate or take these results as factual, but rather, to demonstrate the ways that social engagement around television is being articulated through quantitative data in order to discuss its limitations. Despite Talkwalker's claims to recognize nuance in language and their advancements in processing visual data, machine learning is still incapable of contending with the forms of linguistic and visual engagement that are central to the shared identity of

many fan groups. For example, scholars have pointed to the inability of machine learning to detect code switching as well as the use of linguistic plays, hyperbole, or in-jokes often used within Black, Hispanic, LGBT, or even teen audience communities. Sarah Florini discusses the importance of identity-coded language, such as ‘signifyin’,’ on social media to perform Black racial identity (especially in the absence of corporeal signifiers of racial difference) and enact shared community. She writes:

Signifyin’ serves as an interactional framework that allows Black Twitter users to align themselves with Black oral traditions, to index Black cultural practices, to enact Black subjectivities, and to communicate shared knowledge and experiences. Signifyin’ generally involves elements of humor and displays of wit, and at times may seem frivolous to the uninitiated. But, even at its most lighthearted, signifyin’ is a powerful resource for signaling racial identity, allowing Black Twitter users to perform their racial identities 140 characters at a time. (225)

The recognition of interactional signifyin’ and other forms of non-hegemonic cultural linguistic practices is essential to understanding the nuances of cultural exchange within fan groups, let alone their minute shifts in sentiment and broader contextual signification. Moreover, Christian et al. also argue that the contextual semantics of visual media shared among intersectional fan communities inevitably evade algorithmic interpretation. In their analysis of Tweets posted during the premieres of Open-TV series *Brown Girls* (2017-) and *Brujos* (2017-), they write:

Several users used GIFs to highlight Leila’s ‘coming out’ scene by quoting her sister who says, ‘all that hiding is going to kill you’ (hiding from her Muslim auntie, specifically); ‘we have so much family that’s not blood family’ (referring to queer chosen family); and ‘quit hiding.’ ...One user responded to the series’ first scene revealing Leila’s ‘fat femme’ Latinx lover in bed using an image of Pepperidge Farm’s ‘Very Thin’ white bread, using it to describe what queer representation ‘usually’ is. (6-7)

The authors argue that understanding the intersectional engagement that this visual vernacular represents requires qualitative analysis employed with apt contextual literacy that machine learning cannot replicate. Machine learning-derived sentiment analysis inevitably constitutes violent erasure of the very characteristics of engagement that make these online spaces feel like they belong to Black, LGBT, and other minority audiences.

My goal is not just to critique sentiment analysis, but to speculatively imagine the ways that such machine-learned results can influence television producers’ digital strategy campaigns. Industry metrics will never capture the most culturally valuable forms of audience engagement, and thankfully so since such failures point the inability of algorithms

to fully ‘colonize relationality and imagination’ (Christian et al. 10, quoting Sender n.p.). But with the concession that SCRs have helped make evident the consumer power of certain historically disenfranchised audience groups (perhaps even helping to demarcate online spaces for fan engagement and production) while still leaving space for fans to ignore, resist, or re-appropriate the classifiers and campaigns that structure that discourse, will AI-driven social analytics disrupt this (arguably reasonable) co-existence of commodification and community around television that social media currently hosts? On the one hand, perhaps the wider range of unstructured social media data that firms like Talkwalker can measure could free digital campaigns from having to shape or corral social discourse so stringently. On the other hand, real-time analytics redirecting discourse, over-saturating content, or dominating the vernacular tone of a social-TV community faster than fans can resist or reappropriate will result in a colonization of these online spaces. While the implications of the increasing integration of digital campaigns and AI is not yet evident, if we recognize social-tv communities as valuable spaces of cultural engagement and fan production, more research is needed from scholars working at the intersections of fan studies, critical data studies, and platform studies on the development of social-TV metrics.

Conclusion

SCRs were introduced to take advantage of the rise of online engagement with television amidst the decline of linear ratings and rise of affective marketing. As measurable social engagement has evolved to become, not just supplemental to traditional live ratings in the television industry but valuable unto itself, its strategic cultivation has become an increasingly important part of television production labor. This pursuit of commodifiable social buzz has informed the transtextual properties of some series, as they develop their conflicts, narrative through-lines, or moments of heightened emotion in conjunction with opportunities to cultivate affective engagement. This has resulted in, for example, new expectations around how talent use social media, the proliferation of more social media-engaged aftershows and reunion-shows, networks leaning into hate-watching trends, digital campaigns based on the promotion of teasers and hangers, and the use of owned accounts to create and spread viral memes and gifs, among other practices. This pursuit of strong social engagement metrics has influenced the evolving textual conventions of genres like reality-tv, teen dramas, and award shows.

Moreover, while networks proclaim to value interactivity and SCRs purport to measure social engagement that unfolds organically, in reality, digital strategy teams work to gear audiences toward easily trackable and commodifiable forms of engagement, cultivating the kinds of interactions that will garner success in the SCRs. Digital campaign strategists’ reliance on owned and influencer accounts alongside production teams’ strategic design of classifiers to sort social interactions means that audience conversation is often hierarchized or re-directed en-route to its easy commodification. In the end, SCRs make explicit the complex entanglement of the economic, affective, and cultural underpinnings of the term ‘engagement’.

The stakes of how engagement is cultivated and quantified become further exaggerated as AI tools endeavor to expand the concept of commodifiable engagement beyond the notion of impressions and interactions and toward the assessment and manufacture of sentiment. If we consider that television scholars spent latter part of the 20th-century studying the ways that engagement with television is political and the early part of the new millennium demonstrating that social-TV is an impetus for such engagement, then the ways that new analytics tools re-construct, commodify, and culturally reconfigured online television engagement should be a key area for future research.

Biographical note:

Jennifer Hessler is a Lecturer in the department of Media, Journalism and Film at the University of Huddersfield. Her current book project is a technological history of the Nielsen Ratings that examines the role of audience analytics and data-driven consumer surveillance in the foundation and evolution of commercial television. Contact: j.m.hessler@hud.ac.uk.

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