

Chapter 8

Reframing Audience: Co-Motion at #SOTU

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ABSTRACT

Analysis of the audiences for the state of the union addresses on Twitter from 2010-2012 provides analytical leverage in unpacking the concept of audience, which has largely inhabited an analytical “black box,” seen as of critical importance but little understood. The authors frame audience as “co-motion” as it evolves from a broadcast medium to a medium of interaction in three moves: hashtags that establish a space for gathering, retweets that share reading, and sharing of urls that serve to communicate importance, evaluative judgment, and justification. They contrast the response of the congressional audience and the Twitter audience and find, while there was substantial overlap in their applause, members of Congress were less responsive than the Twitter audience to the president’s calls for them to meet their responsibilities and less responsive to criticisms of major corporations. The authors find a vibrant political discourse on Twitter reaching a potential audience that rivals in size that of television, as audience becomes the public domain.

INTRODUCTION

President Obama (2013) began his 2012 state of the union address:

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, members of Congress, distinguished guests, and fellow Americans:

Last month, I went to Andrews Air Force Base and welcomed home some of our last troops to serve

in Iraq. Together, we offered a final, proud salute to the colors under which more than a million of our fellow citizens fought -- and several thousand gave their lives.

We gather tonight knowing that this generation of heroes has made the United States safer and more respected around the world. (Applause.) For the first time in nine years, there are no Americans fighting in Iraq. (Applause.) For the first time in

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two decades, Osama bin Laden is not a threat to this country. (Applause.) Most of al Qaeda's top lieutenants have been defeated. The Taliban's momentum has been broken, and some troops in Afghanistan have begun to come home.

In those few seconds a flood of communication emanated from the audience. They reflected on the president's words:

"Ooooooooooh, good opening! 'Mission Accomplished, BUT FOR REAL'. #SOTU." And "My President ended the war in Iraq!!! @BarackObama #Sotu!!!" They were impressed. [110 times]

But there were some who were not impressed:

"More respected? By who? #sotu"; "Starts off saying Iraq heroes have made American more respected around the world. Is that why he opposed surge? #SOTU" [59 times]

For the president there was love as in "there is my president up there, damn, he has some swag #sotu #obama2012." [43 times] And there was hate: "He just got started and I already feel nauseous #SOTU." [71 times]

For the first lady there was only love: "Michelle Obama looks amazing #SOTU." [59 times]

There were tears as they remembered: "RT @lap58: Im in tears...that was so sweet! RT @JessicaTaylor: Huge cheers as Obama hugs Rep. Giffords. Incredibly touching moment #sotu." [83 times]

Speaker Boehner's complexion and scowl drew "@JoyVBehar John Boehner's skin is the most beautiful shade of orange I have ever seen. Puts @snooki to shame. #cnn #sotu." [77 times]

As did Vice President Biden's tie: "Joe Biden's tie is playing havoc with my non-HD tv. #SOTU." [71 times]

Drinking games were encouraged: "RT @StephenAtHome: SOTU drinking game: One shot after each time Obama says something socialist. If

you're confused, it's at the end of every sentence." [69 times]

As were insider jokes: "The State of the Union should be 140 characters or less #SOTU #Obama #fb." [46 times]

They spotted people in the audience: "RT @secupp: Just spotted John Kerry at SOTU. He looks the way most Americans feel tonight. #blackeyes." [24 times] Senator Kerry was recovering from a hockey injury.

And they noted the absence of Supreme Court justices: "Exactly, @Halloweenblogs, the justices have self deported this evening. #sotu." [20 times]

They found the constant applause grating: "And the standing o[vation] war begins! #sotu." [135 times]

There was hope for a bi-partisan evening "RT @TheFix: People love #sotu because it feels like genuine bipartisanship is possible. It's like opening day in baseball." [41 times]

They were anticipating what would come next: "I anxiously await the Buffett Rule portion of tonight's Address #SOTU." "RT @jaimejcoon: I want to hear President Obama fully endorse equality for LGBTQ people. #SOTU @nytimes." [43 times]

They posted locations of the text of the speech. [42 times] And where it was being broadcast. [38 times]

In that one minute, 8:12 p.m., 1,357 messages were posted to Twitter. Very few were about the actions of the persons posting. [74 times] The rest were about the event they were observing. One of the most striking features of this 1,357 messages is the diversity. There were many focii, and little variation in numbers between them. The communication was exceedingly multi-faceted (Twitter, n.d.).

We know about two audiences. The audience in the room was bobbing up and down at approximately one minute intervals. The audience who became speakers were observing every facet of the event and commenting on what they saw and heard.

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