

New Media Goes to the Movies: Digitizing the Theatrical Audience

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Abstract

Movie theaters typically appear adjacent to discussions of new media. Although there has been work on digital cinema, we shift the focus from the digitization of the medium to the digitization of the theatrical audience and analyze the movie theater as new media. To do so, we look at the historical and contemporary strategies for digitizing the theatrical audience of a prominent theater chain. We identify common media of digitization, including credit cards, computerized point-of-sale systems, and loyalty programs. The origins of these techniques and imperatives trace back to the 1970s and 1980s, even as they take on new forms today. We then analyze the industrial logics of audience digitization and emergent communication and data collection methods. Finally, we analyze the movie theater as a platform, showing both the relevance of movie theaters and the challenges their inclusion as an object of study poses for contemporary platform studies.

Introduction

In 1999, *Variety* published an article about the changes coming to theatrical distribution and exhibition with the dawn of a new “Digital Era,” which began with a speculative account of what the industry would look like in five years’ time:

Using his computer keyboard and mouse, the president of top U.S. theater chain Regal/Loews-AMC books the upcoming weekend’s films into his circuit’s theaters. As he clicks on the titles (“Austin Powers 4: You Only Shag Twice,” “The Matrix III” and MGM’s long-awaited “Supernova”) the films begin downloading via satellite to the

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circuit's digital megaplexes around the globe. Meanwhile, down the hall, the company's CFO gets an up-to-the-minute read on the 18,003-screen circuit's grosses on his Palm Pilot XIV pocket computer. Then he logs on for his annual video conference call with Disney's head of business affairs to negotiate the studio's share of its films' box office for the coming year. (Hindes 1999)

Only a few months earlier, Lucasfilm Ltd. released *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) in digital format to four different theaters in the United States, fueling the flames of an ongoing industrial debate over the respective values of digital and filmic formats (Acland 2003, 215–16). By 2007, major North American movie theater circuits, including AMC, Regal, and Cinemark, joined forces with Warner Bros. and Universal Pictures to form the Digital Cinema Distribution Coalition (DCDC) and promote digital formats and the digital distribution of movies via satellite (White). The DCDC has been successful: digital distribution has reached widespread saturation with approximately 75% of screens in the United States receiving movies via satellite by the end of 2016 (Lieberman 2017). The future may not have delivered a Palm Pilot XIV pocket computer, but the changes brought about by digitization have been substantial and far-reaching.

Despite the general prescience of *Variety's* forecast, the depiction of the so-called Digital Era tells an incomplete story of digitization, due to its focus on format and distribution. Similarly, academic research on digital cinemaⁱ also takes a narrow approach that leaves larger industrial logics unaddressed. In so doing, the framework of digital cinema separates cinema from the ongoing changes in media and communication technologies encapsulated in the language of new media. However, as Charles Acland helpfully reminds us, a movie theater is not just a site of leisure; it is a workplace and “location for the management of new technology” (2000, 376). We take up the movie theater in this light, examining the integration of new technologies into theatrical exhibition. A historical analysis of digitization efforts in theatrical exhibition challenges the conventional chronology of old media and new media, and supports a broader understanding of new media that directs scholarly attention to the mundane objects and practices that constitute the ‘Digital Era.’ Additionally, a focus upon the digitization of the audience itself, a process that is often occluded by treating digitality as a technical quality rather than a sociotechnical one, reveals the way that industrial conceptions of new media are converted into interactive initiatives that encourage the reconfiguration of audiences as both sources and recipients of digitized information.

Where Acland (2000) uses the structure of movie theaters to critique the framework of film studies, we use the case of theatrical exhibition to develop the category of new media. New media is a slippery term, at once denoting radical new possibilities,ⁱⁱ insidious threats,ⁱⁱⁱ and an empty façade that perpetuates artificial differences.^{iv} Bearing in mind Lisa Gitelman's (2008) insistence that every medium was once new, the term takes on specificity in contemporary discourse that is worth engaging on its own merits. According to media scholar P. David Marshall, new media is

broadly defined as the digitalization of our culture... Moreover, new media expresses a shifted relation of an audience to media use: what we are seeing is a media industry that is as much about media production, exhibition, and distribution as it is about facilitating communication among its audience. (2009, 61)

Marshall further argues that developments in new media have significant effects on the production of “older media such as film and television” (2009, 61). While it is undeniable that developments in digital media have influenced the production of film, we would like to trouble the distinction between cinema and new media. Following the example of television scholars who have documented the transformation of the medium through TIVO, set-top boxes, bingeing, smart TVs, and streaming video on demand (SVOD),^v we argue that theatrical exhibition began an on-going process of digitization in the late 1970s that has resulted in a digital cinema which shares many key attributes of new media, including personalization (Negroponte 1995; Pariser 2011), interactivity (Jenkins 2006a; Manovich 2001), and on-demand access (Tryon 2009; Everett 2004). By analyzing cinema through the analytic category of new media, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the operations of theatrical exhibition, especially as they relate to the audience and to industrial conceptualizations of new media.

We adopt the language of new media with the acknowledgement that its newness is a dynamic and relational quality. For our examination of the digitization of theatrical operations and audiences, the term has particular salience. Given the historical trends in theatrical exhibition, where digital technologies have frequently been derided and rejected by theater executives, the objects of our analysis are quite literally *new* media. The integration of smart phones and other second screen technologies, app-based subscription and loyalty programs, targeted advertising, and digital value-adds appended to non-physical ticket purchases represent a rupture in the conventions of movie theater operation. The new features under examination, each of which engages and operationalizes, in the context of theatrical exhibition, the new media qualities of personalization, interactivity, and on-demand access, serve as some of the most significant and disruptive consumer-facing changes to the movie industry in decades.^{vi} To explain why theater executives have recently begun to embrace changes to operations and modes of exhibition that have persisted for decades, we first examine the media of digitization that serve to convert theatrical spaces into something akin to digital platforms. Following this, we analyze the largest theatrical chain in the United States, AMC, as a case in which to study how these changes are being envisioned and enacted by the industry, and what effect this has upon longstanding industrial logics.

Media of Digitization

From Palm Pilots to point-of-sale systems, electronics have long played a crucial role in the day-to-day operations of theatrical exhibition. These assorted electronics function as part of

the “media industry productive matrix,” alongside other ancillary industries such as market research and the trade press (Hilmes 2009). While theatrical exhibition always involves technology, the particular technologies involved are changing. Industry leaders emphasize both the stresses and the benefits provided by new modes of displaying films, selling tickets, and interacting with audiences. In his 2014 address to CinemaCon, then Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) chairman and former Senator Chris Dodd (2014) encouraged attendees not to think of technology as an adversary, reminding them that “it can, and must be, our ally,” a tool to “serve us rather than disrupt us.” Among the technologies that theatrical exhibitors seek to ally with are loyalty and subscription programs that track user behavior and produce targeted, personalized advertising, and augmented reality (AR) apps like AMC Amazing that overlay the physical theater with digital movie posters. We characterize these assorted technologies as media of digitization, or tools that render the material world as information. Media of digitization draw attention to the ways that less obvious forms and domains, including but certainly not restricted to theatrical exhibition, become enrolled in the techniques and logics of new media.

The introduction of new media features to the traditionally structured, mass-delivered cinema format has been anticipated and explicitly resisted by theatrical exhibitors for over a decade, as demonstrated by Dodd’s exhortation to theatrical exhibitors to enjoin new media as a partner that can serve the industry, rather than an interloper or ‘disruptor.’ In doing so, Dodd warned exhibitors they could not simply add new technological features, but must also reconceptualize both the end product and exhibitor’s role in the movie industry. “While the studios I represent, and other production companies, are called ‘content producers’, in reality we are technology companies manufacturing content,” Dodd argued. If movie studios are understood as both content and technology companies, then exhibitors should be viewed similarly as selling a mix of content and technology, a point demonstrated by the distinctions, for example, between “standard,” IMAX, and 3D movie tickets.

The newness of the technological features we are isolating, and with which movie exhibitors have struggled, rely not on just new technical abilities, but also upon new logics. José van Dijck and Thomas Poell explain the evolution from what they term “mass media logic” to “social media logic,” which refers to the “processes, principles, and practices” by which social media platforms circulate information and generate user engagement (van Dijck and Poell 2013, 5). Van Dijck and Poell argue that the logics of social media and mass media, where mass media logics largely rely on institutional output and decisions, are more and more intertwined, producing what they term a “platform society” which relies on the infrastructures and logic of digital media (van Dijck and Poell 2015, 1). Likewise, the movie theater industry operates not according to one or the other of these logics, but via a combination of both. It is the introduction of a new logic of customer identification and interaction as much as the technological enablement of it that promises to disrupt the movie theater industry.

Movie Theater as Platform

The incorporation of technologies that digitize the interactions of customers in traditionally physical spaces is not unique to theaters; Joseph Turow, Lee McGuigan, and Elena R Marris offer a helpful analogue in their examination of the incorporation of digital surveillance and tracking technologies in retail stores, arguing that “retailers are encouraging daily routines that accept data-driven personalization as a centrifugal public force” (2015, 476) by installing devices and using services designed to identify customers’ interests and geographic location in order to deliver personalized advertisements to their mobile devices. As CEO Cyriac Roeding of shopping rewards app Shopkick, explains, Shopkick and similar apps “inject digital juice into the physical world, and make the offline, touchable world, a more interactive experience” (quoted in Swartz 2012), a rhetoric and strategy that reflects emergent industry tactics like AR movie posters that appear when using AMC’s app at a theater.

We argue that tactics like AR integration, apps that deliver personalized advertising to moviegoers, and other digital overlays and imperatives within the physical space of movie theaters serve to convert these places into “platforms.” Chuck Tryon argues that the contemporary media platform

actively solicits an individualized, fragmented, and empowered media consumer, one who has greater control over when, where, and how she watches movies and television shows. However, this offer of liberation from the viewing schedule is often accompanied by increased surveillance, giving studios, streaming video services, and social media companies more precise information for their efforts to market directly to those individualized viewers. (2009, 14)

This account implicitly brackets off theatrical exhibition from the discussion of contemporary media platforms, though the reason for this exclusion is not clear. As communication scholar Tarleton Gillespie explains, the term platform has particular associations with computation, specifically as something that can be programmed with source code from the user. Despite the technical origins of the term, its common usage is significantly broader: “Platforms are platforms not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact, or sell” (Gillespie 2010), which aligns with Van Dijck and Poell’s understanding of social media platform logic as that which moves customers and interests together. This more expansive definition of platforms encompasses streaming media services, social media, and, we would argue with the rise of audience digitization strategies, even the physical movie theater.

Compared to streaming video on demand (SVOD) services like Netflix, the traditional movie theater may seem a difficult and restrictive sort of platform. For one, the movie theater is a space geographically distinct from everyday life, a point emphasized by the very term moviegoer—one who *goes* to the movies. Additionally, theaters are physically limited in the number of movies and showtimes they can offer; after all, there are only so many screens in a

place and so many hours in a day. While a contemporary 30-screen megaplex would offer an unprecedented abundance of options to someone time traveling from the 1950s, when the majority of movie theaters only had a single screen, even thirty options can seem insignificant compared to the thousands of options available online. Despite these material limitations, movie theaters have sought to offer something akin to on-demand access using an assortment of different strategies. As a result, going to the movie theater becomes only one way in which company and customer can interact, instead of the exclusive way to do so.

As the comic in Figure 1 pointedly argues, the movie theater has been thoroughly digitized, from the format of movies to methods of distribution to activity-tracking loyalty programs that tie viewing information to specific audience members. Movie theaters have long ‘afforded an opportunity to communicate, interact, or sell,’ but the particular ways they accomplish these ends have been altered by the introduction of digital technologies. The movie theater, borrowing from McGuigan and Vincent Mazerolle’s (2014) discussion of ubiquitous commerce, is, in essence, becoming a physical website. The theatrical audience, then, are simultaneously digitized media users.



Figure 1. The comic depicts the digitization of the movie theater by rendering the building of the theater as a literal oversized desktop computer topped with a satellite dish to download the latest pictures.

Note: Author screenshot of Katherine Stalter’s (1997) article “Will exhibits get hooked on ‘tronics?”

Although the idea of digitization is implicit in most accounts of platforms, including Tarleton Gillespie’s work, explicit discussion of the meanings and boundaries of digitization is absent.

Too often, a common-sense understanding steps in: that of the individual user interacting with a digital computer, large or small. However, the case study of AMC Theatres shows the limitations of this common-sense understanding.

The Case of AMC

Although a handful of circuits dominate the U.S. market, theatrical exhibition does not refer to a singular set of practices. Differences abound across the major chains, smaller circuits, and independent theaters.^{vii} We limit our analysis in this article to a single circuit: American Multi-Cinemas, better known as AMC Theatres. As the largest circuit in both the United States and the world (Gray 2017), and as a member of the largest global movie theater industry group (“Global Cinema Federation” n.d.), the policies and practices of AMC Theatres have sizeable reach and influence. Furthermore, AMC Theatres has long been at the forefront of technological innovation in the United States: it offered the first automated box-office machines (*Variety* 1990), established the first large-scale customer loyalty program (A. Fuchs 2013), and, more recently, was the first exhibitor to partner with the now infamous start-up MoviePass to offer a subscription model for moviegoing (Pahle 2015) before launching its own subscription service in 2018. In keeping with the protocols of critical media industry studies (Havens, Lotz, and Tinic 2009), we analyze the industrial discourse of theatrical exhibition as expressed through the trade press, popular press, AMC investor reports and securities filings, and online promotional materials. We seek to investigate the industrial understanding of digitization and the subsequent shifts in the ways that exhibitors communicate with audiences, program theater schedules, create value for the theatrical experience, and track the habits and preferences of moviegoers.

The introduction of electronic computers into the practices of theatrical exhibition is a comparatively recent phenomenon. AMC began experimenting with the use of computers in the 1970s and 1980s, and by 1985 AMC was listing “computer box offices” among the amenities for new theater construction (*Variety* 1985). This use of computers fits with reports from industry conventions of the same time period. For example, the 1985 theatrical exhibition Show-A-Rama included a seminar on the use of computers in exhibition which a reporter covering the event notes, “would have been unheard of on an agenda for working theatermen [sic]” as little as five years earlier (Quinn 1985). In the “world of motion picture theater operation,” electronics primarily refers to “the computer and its data processing capabilities for transmitting and reporting grosses and concession and supply inventories,” a vision of operations repackaged as futuristic by the end of the millennium (Quinn 1985). In the years since, this sort of digital tracking of physical inventory has become common across many industries.

The integration of electronic computers into exhibition practices was not without its difficulties. The following anecdote from a 1987 earnings report gives an indication of the dynamics involved:

Officials also noted that the circuit has found a monster in the computer system used to report grosses and other information from theaters to the home office and to district offices. Computers have required more expenditures, more learning time from execs and operators than had been expected. [Stanley] Durwood [founder and CEO] said the company is gaining on the computers, however, and hopes to have them under control in the very near future. (Quinn 1987)

Integrating computers entailed significant costs in terms of financial expenditures and the time required to learn how to operate the machines effectively. Additionally, computers necessitate a different way of knowing, one concerned with detailed and up-to-date information, rendered in the language of numbers, and “monstrous” in its difference from *human* ways of knowing.^{viii} Though it’s not clear if Stanley Durwood ever got the monster-computers under control, AMC continued to introduce new computers and other electronics into its operations, aggressively pursuing a series of new initiatives through the early 1990s.

Despite any trepidation AMC might have had about its own control over new technology, front-facing computers were introduced to cinematic audiences in 1989 when the Oak Park Plaza Cinema 6 in Johnson County, Kansas offered patrons the ability to purchase tickets by credit card. Although the installation, which included three credit card machines, cost a substantial \$46,000, executive Frank Stryjewski announced plans to install credit card machines at five other theaters in the near future (*Variety* 1989). During the following year, the “new \$7-million Santa Monica 7” theater unveiled the first automated box office, composed of “machines dispensing tickets and refreshments vouchers at the rate of one customer a minute” (*Variety* 1990). These updates represented direct changes to the audience experience, pushing customers to interact more explicitly with new technologies in the theater.

In addition to pushing digital technologies at the point of purchase, AMC also pioneered modes of gathering digital data about moviewatching habits and preferences. In 1990, the company introduced its original customer loyalty program, MovieWatchers, modeled on airlines’ frequent-flier programs (*Variety* 1991). As Stephen Colanero, AMC’s chief marketing officer reflects, the program was “the first large-scale loyalty program in the industry and it was certainly revolutionary in its day,” offering points-per-visit that went towards coupons for concessions and tickets and, at its peak, included 7 million members (quoted in A. Fuchs 2013; see also, Kung 2011). Participation in the program dwindled, following the trend of moviegoing itself, and by 2011 there were only 1.5 million active members. The decline in participation led the marketing team to introduce a new rewards program called AMC Stubs. Unlike MovieWatcher, which was free to sign-up for, the Stubs program initially required customers to pay an annual fee of \$12 and allowed members to earn rewards on a per-dollar-spent basis, getting \$10 back for every \$100 spent, free size upgrades on popcorn and soda, and no fees for buying tickets online through the AMC website (AMC 2014).^{ix} For both MovieWatcher and AMC Stubs, loyalty programs provide a way for the company to encourage desirable customer behaviors, such as frequent attendance and concessions purchases, and enable the company to

track customer behaviors with finer granularity. The structure of loyalty programs facilitates an exchange between businesses and customers, where businesses receive the “right to access and use member data” and customers receive designated offers and benefits, not unlike the advertising-driven model of modern social media platforms (Liebmann and Lewthwaite 2014).

The final audience digitization strategies involve the company’s online presence. In November 1998, AMC launched its first website where visitors could view daily show times, movie theater locations, access Tele-Ticket phone numbers to purchase advance tickets over the phone, and sign-up for the MovieWatcher loyalty program (Brada 1998). While the aesthetics of the website have certainly changed over the years, and Tele-Ticket phone numbers have been replaced with e-commerce, the URL and basic functionalities of providing movie times, locations, and advance ticket purchasing remain the same (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). In 2010, AMC launched a company Facebook page and verified Twitter account, later adding a Pinterest board, Instagram account, Google Plus page, and YouTube channel to its social media portfolio. The various accounts permit the company to disseminate information, interact with customers, and host contests. Additionally, as Stephen Colanero explains, a robust social media presence provides access to valuable customer information because "these online discussions are tremendous opportunities to listen to what our guests are saying about AMC and engage with them on some of the great initiatives we're rolling out" (International 2011). As the privacy policy on the current website makes clear, the company actively collects and aggregates user data on its various websites and social media accounts (AMC 2012).

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 Theatres
 About AMC
 Investor Relations
 AMC INTERNATIONAL
 Movie-Watcher
 Kids Corner

Figure 2. AMC's home on the web from from 20 March 2000 includes familiar features packaged in a now unfamiliar and outdated design aesthetic.

Note: Author screenshot from the Wayback Machine.

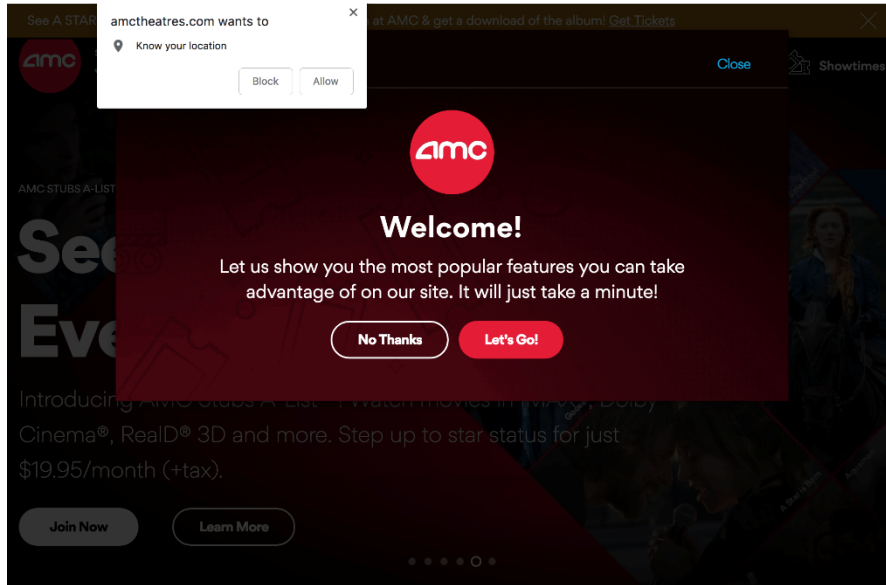


Figure 3. AMC’s home on the web from 29 September 2018 comes with a streamlined design and robust data gathering capabilities.

Note: Author screenshot of the website.

Starting in 2011, around the same time that the Stubs loyalty program launched, AMC Theatres began offering unconventional tickets for movies in select markets. These tickets enabled customers to see the movie and get something extra, including posters and digital movie downloads. For example, with *Anchorman 2* (2013), AMC partnered with Fandango to offer a ‘Super Ticket’ for \$33 that let a customer

see the *Anchorman* sequel two days before its Dec. 18 release date, [and] includes a digital download of an alternative version of the original film, *Anchorman—Wake Up Ron Burgundy: The Lost Movie*; a pre-order for the digital download of *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues*, which will be available weeks before the film is released on DVD and Blue-ray; and a \$5 concession card. (Lewis 2013)

The movie theater ticket thus becomes a gateway to the theatrical experience *and* a way to access alternative media formats. Other unconventional tickets featured interviews with the director, producer, or members of the cast following the film (Marich 2012), similar to the special features often included on DVD and streaming versions of films. The promotions aim to replicate the on-demand experiences of other media formats and simultaneously emphasize the exclusive status of the *loyal* moviegoer.

In December 2014, AMC announced that they were pairing up with subscription-based ticket service MoviePass to offer a service called MoviePass Premium in two test markets. Founded in 2011 by media industry veteran Stacy Spikes and tech entrepreneur Hamet Watt,

MoviePass was not well received by theater chains at launch, as both AMC and Landmark refused to participate in its pilot program. Despite this setback, however, Spikes in particular refused to shift away from his vision of digitized ticket sales by subscription, as he explained in industry publication *Deadline*:

I imagine a day where studio executives can see real-time decisions that subscribers are making from their phones and devices. If studios say they are not interested in being able to talk to their customers, knowing what they are thinking and being able to notify them of things like ancillary items, and that theater owners aren't interested in having these people go to the movies more, and drive up concessions sales, and having us put all this in the palms of their hands, then I'm in the wrong business. (quoted in Fleming Jr. 2011)

For several years, as MoviePass struggled to become a functioning company, AMC continued to either ignore the service or publicly decry it (Block 2011, 2012; Moon 2017); at the same time, however, Spikes was calling up visions of the future that theater chains had been working towards for years with other digitization strategies, including loyalty programs and digital box offices.

In partnering with MoviePass to offer MoviePass Premium, AMC finally expressed open interest in the subscription model, but limited this endorsement to two test markets (Denver and Boston). MoviePass Premium, which cost subscribers \$30 to \$45 a month, enabled subscribers to see up to one movie per day, including movies in premium formats such as IMAX and 3D (Lang 2014). AMC, however, had never inherently been against a subscription service. Since 2015, its European brand, Odeon, has run a subscription service called Limitless (*BT* 2016; "About Us" n.d.). European brands have often been test sites for new modes of theatrical operations, as their relatively smaller size and insulation from the core American brands allows more experimental freedom, while still reflecting positively on American ownership when successful. Widespread uptake of experimental features, however, still generally relies on their viability in American markets. For example, in 2001, with their first loyalty program, MovieWatcher, AMC ran tests on a program that looked shockingly similar to MoviePass Premium, known as MovieWatcher Premium. For \$17.50 a month in the test markets of Omaha and Oklahoma City, subscribers could see a movie a day (Goldsmith 2001). The industry's cautious enthusiasm and concerns around MoviePass in 2011 largely echoed the conversation around experiments with subscription moviegoing in 2001. Jim Tharp, then distribution chief for Dreamworks, told *Variety*, "We can't tell them what to charge, but it certainly causes angst on our end" (Goldsmith 2001), predicting AMC's own sentiments towards MoviePass a decade later.

MovieWatcher Premium did not continue beyond its 2001 test run, likely in response to anxieties from studio executives; Paramount opted out of the program, Dreamworks withheld films from the test markets, and other studios publicly expressed concerns to the trade press (DiOrio 2001; Goldsmith 2001). Likewise, the collaborative MoviePass Premium program did not continue beyond its two-city trial market, and the two companies have since taken diverging

paths towards establishing a subscription-based ticketing service. Regardless of the results of the test, the surrounding discourse attests to the changing economics of the media industry in the twenty-first century. Only a decade ago, Netflix presented itself as a computerized version of the lowly video rental store clerk, and today, MoviePass is hailed as the ‘Netflix of Moviegoing,’ a title reinforced by MoviePass’s hire of former Netflix executive Mitch Lowe as CEO in 2016 (Spangler 2016).

With the hire of Adam Aron as CEO in 2016, whose background includes developing the loyalty programs for major airlines, leisure travel, and hotel groups upon which the Stubs program was originally based, AMC signaled a renewed commitment to customer tracking, electronic communications, and other digital audience initiatives (Lang 2017). One of Aron’s first major changes was the redesign and relaunch the AMC Stubs program, which has, since its 2016 re-launch, attracted nearly 16 million members in two years. “It’s no accident that when we launched [ticket subscription service] A-List, we launched it as a VIP tier within our AMC Stubs program as opposed to launching some separate program divorced and outside of AMC Stubs,” he told investors in August 2018 (qtd. in Merriwether 2018). Approximately 40% of ticket purchases at AMC theaters in 2018 used Stubs memberships, allowing the company to track almost half of their audience through the program; as such, integrating the data gathered from A-List creates a unified, branded information collection and direct advertising system for AMC, tailored to its most loyal customers.

The tone of industry discourse towards subscription-model moviegoing has shifted significantly in recent years, as it has come to be seen as a part of the wider digitization strategies in operation since the 1970s. A-List represents AMC’s first major endorsement of the subscription ticket model, a development in ticket pricing that Barak Orbach, a leading researcher of trends in ticket sales, argues is “by orders of magnitude the most significant change in the history of the ticket pricing” economy (qtd. in Rodriguez 2018). Industry insiders, such as Jeff Box, an analyst for box office research firm Exhibitor Relations, agree with this assessment. “This is an explosion,” Box told *Quartz*. “This is it. This is, when they talk about it in 50-100 years, they’re going to be talking about this moment.... I don’t believe we’ve seen anything this atomic since movie tickets have been tracked” (qtd. in Rodriguez 2018). The reason theaters can afford to offer cheaper ticket prices to some users is because they are being compensated with rich data, largely drawn from the most avid moviegoers who are more likely to be enticed back to the theater regularly, and more likely to spend on extras such as concessions while there. Digitization of AMC’s audience is directly tied to the company’s ability to shake-up the institution of ticket pricing in “atomic” ways, and subscription-based pricing is a development that AMC’s CEO has promised investors and consumers “will be a permanent feature” (Merriwether 2018). Arguably, it needs to be; a 2018 report from the MPAA backs up AMC’s move to expand value outside of the theater itself, noting that almost all of the industry’s recent revenue growth has occurred in “nontheatrical” spaces such as digital streaming platforms (Brueggemann and Harris 2019). Tracking customers’ movie viewing habits both inside and outside of the theater has increasingly become a core part of exhibition.

Through media of digitization, the audience becomes a cybernetic commodity, “valuable both as commodities and as objects that produce information that can be further commodified” (Morris 2012). Digital point-of-sale systems, credit cards, loyalty programs, websites, and social media accounts transform audience consumption and communication patterns into information that feeds the exhibition process. Ultimately, the goal is to discover what drives audiences to theaters, and to incentivize attendance by integrating the movie theater into the daily digital routines of modern audiences. Taken together, these strategies convert moviegoing preferences and habits into digital information that can be operationalized to advertise future films and communicate the value of the theatrical experience.

Industrial Logics

Stacy Spikes, cofounder and former CEO of MoviePass, argues that the “economics of the movie industry... has to digitize” in order for the industry to market to consumers directly (Pahle 2015). Though Spikes downplays the existing means through which the theatrical audience is digitized, he rightly points to the connection between digitization and personal communication with audience members. MoviePass and similar subscription programs like Sinemia and AMC’s A-List, loyalty cards, and online ticket sales all provide the industry with purchasing and preference data associated with individual consumers. This, in turn, provides exhibitors and others with information that facilitates more personalized marketing communications. The turn towards personalization is a distinct shift for an industry so strongly associated with mass spectatorship and it is motivated, in part, by general changes in marketing. Where direct marketing was once a marginal practice, associated with ‘miracle drugs’ and karate course mailers, many of the principles involved have come into popular prominence under a set of different terms: databases, personalization, niches, and targets (Turow 2006, 12–13). The increased take-up of loyalty rewards programs and e-commerce across the major circuits follows consumer expectations for convenience and access, alongside a growing industrial prioritization of data.

The origins of these trends precede the spread of smart phones, social media, and even the web itself. As Acland argues, “‘value’ appeared in relation to the procedures of exchange in cinemagoing” around the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, with the introduction of MovieFone^x into major US markets (2003, 105). The dual discourses of value, consumer and industrial, relate to the increasingly competitive media and entertainment market, where many theatrical exhibitors have looked beyond the box office and concessions receipts for new ways to extract and provide value. One way this plays out is through greater attention to what media industries scholar Phillip Napoli (2009) calls “the audience market,” or selling advertising time to advertisers. Historically associated with broadcast mediums like television, advertising is increasingly present in movie theaters in the form of TV-like advertisements shown before the feature film. Identifying and tracking audience members provides rich demographic information

and allows for exhibitors and their partners to create more appealing pitches for prospective advertising buyers (Networks 2014).

In addition to establishing the value of pre-roll ads, the digitization of the audience also enables theater exhibitors to craft programming schedules tailored to their specific customer base and special promotions. Responding to a question about upcoming changes to programming strategies with AMC's 2012 buyout by Chinese movie theater company and retail mogul Dalian Wanda Group, then CEO Gerry Lopez denied a change in strategy, explaining that AMC would remain "all about understanding who our audience is, building by building, and then programming to cater to their tastes and preferences" (A. Fuchs 2012). Lopez also claimed that the theater circuit's marketing had been improving, thanks to the digital point-of-sale systems and the AMC Stubs loyalty program. With networked computer systems, information about a particular theater can be simultaneously available to the director of that theater and to the district and circuit headquarters. In recent years, AMC has offered advanced screenings to loyalty program members for films such as *Warm Bodies* (2013), *Les Misérables* (2012), *Parental Guidance* (2012), and *Warrior* (2011), among others (Stewart 2013). The "win-win" framing is characteristic of industry discourse surrounding loyalty programs and targeted marketing.

At the level of direct communication, AMC targets customers, especially loyalty program members, with personalized messages through the following channels: email, SMS, and mobile applications. These communications include information about current and upcoming movies, reward status and special promotions, as well as survey prompts and alerts. AMC's social media presence offers a different, more interactive dynamic between company and customer. Interactivity on the AMC Theatres Facebook page takes the form of soliciting engagement from followers with questions, polls, prompts for comment, and contests. Among the different genres of interactivity, contests consistently generate the most visible customer engagements on social media and the most discussion in the trade press. These contests, often characterized as "social rewards," typically offer movie merchandise or trips to special film screenings for randomly selected participants. Sun Dee Mills Larson, vice president of film marketing and communications for AMC, explains that the contests provide a way to "reward guests for dollars spent at AMC," and, implicitly, encourage guests to spend more in the process (A. Fuchs 2011).

AMC, in comparison to the other major North American circuits, has been especially active in cultivating a social media following and promoting customer engagement. As Stephen Colanero notes, "AMC Theatres became the first theatre circuit to reach one-million 'likes' on Facebook, officially passing the mark on May 6, 2011... We recognized Facebook was where our guests were discussing not only the movies that they loved, but also the overall moviegoing experience" (International 2011). The online conversations provide insight on customer preferences, experiences, and expectations and also facilitate the promotion of new initiatives. As of September 2018, the number of AMC Facebook 'likes' had grown to over 6.3 million, compared to 2.7 million for Regal Cinemas, and 1.3 million for Cinemark.^{xi} Social media offers a way for AMC to extend and enhance customer loyalty initiatives, deliver promotional discourse, offer interactive experiences for customers and potential customers, and transform

social media users into operational information. Thus, the digitization of the audience is, as Christian Fuchs observes of social media users more generally, simultaneously the commodification of the audience (C. Fuchs 2012, 712).

Interactivity ends when the lights go down. While the AMC Amazing app includes augmented reality features for the posters in the lobby and National CineMedia (NCM) has experimented with interactive smart phone features for pre-roll ads, AMC has notably avoided introducing new forms of interactive engagement during the movie screening itself. This reluctance can be attributed, in part, to anxieties around distraction (Hassoun 2014) and the lack of a successful precedent. However, this reluctance also fits with AMC's corporate strategy of framing theatrical moviegoing as historically unchanging, captured by their slogan, "Come and see movies the way they were meant to be seen." The rhetorical power of the slogan emphasizes the continuity in consumer experience even as technologies have significantly altered the management and programming strategies involved in the creation of that experience. Media of digitization gather information about movie audiences discretely; these processes are not designed to be noticed by the audience. AMC celebrates technologically mediated interactivity at the back end, using audience information systems to guide operations, while it resists that kind of interactivity at the level of consumer experience (at least during the film itself).

Conclusion

While there has been increased interest in the materiality of the digital (Kennedy and Bates 2017), there remains need for more work exploring the digitization of the material in mundane contexts. By tracing of the digitization of the theatrical audience, we show how empirical cases such as theatrical exhibition offer sites to explore and extend theoretical accounts of media and digital technology. We also model a way of approaching media studies outside of common categories like production, consumption, and distribution. Beginning with the comparatively overlooked category of exhibition, the study reveals industrial logics that operate in both digital and physical 'viewing platforms.' For example, the techniques of tracking and targeting the theatrical audience in movie theater loyalty programs and subscription services also operate behind the scenes of online streaming services. The kinds of corporate communication strategies that AMC deploys with SMS and email are likewise not restricted to theater circuits, but instead represent direct marketing techniques that are increasingly present across domains of commercial activity. Our move towards understanding movie theaters as platforms demonstrates how the logic of 'new media' has exceeded its commonly-perceived digital boundaries and now has a demonstrable effect on the industrial logics, material offerings, and communication and data-gathering practices of theater exhibitors. The Digital Era encompasses more than social and streaming media platforms—it is also comprised of point-of-sale systems, loyalty programs, targeted communications, and other media of digitization.

Authors' Note

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ⁱ See, for example, the analysis of aesthetic transformations in media culture in D. N. Rodowick’s *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007), Henry Jenkins’ treatment of *Star Wars* fan works as a democratizing force in digital media production (2006b), and Lev Manovich’s historical account about the declining value of indexicality in the philosophy of digital cinema (1996).

ⁱⁱ See, for example, *Time* magazine selecting “You” as the person of the year in 2006 (Grossman 2006), or the much discussed influence of social media in the protests and uprisings of the Arab Spring (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Eli Pariser’s ‘filter bubbles’ (2011), Joseph Turow’s work on commercial surveillance and reputation silos (2006), and Cass Sunstein’s analysis of the tensions between commercial choice and democratic deliberation in online news (2017).

^{iv} This is a common refrain in work on media archeology, which often reads the new against the old (Huhtamo and Parikka). It is also the premise of Henry Jenkins’ account of convergence culture (2006a).

^v See, for example, Max Dawson’s work on television as a medium in transition between analog and digital media technologies (2010); William Boddy’s analysis of technological changes within audience surveillance and advertising strategies (2011); Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn’s concept of television overflow (2003); William Uricchio’s work on the VCR, remote, and other technological intermediaries (2004); Brett Christopher’s analysis of power relations in the UK’s shift from analog to digital format television (2008), and Gillian Doyle’s work on how digital distribution is transforming windowing practices (2016).

^{vi} These are not the only qualities that can be isolated as important features of new media and social media. Our goal is not to create a comprehensive set of heuristics for measuring new media versus legacy media or mass media, but rather to isolate what we term “media of digitization,” or specific qualities of interactive media that serve to convert consumer habits and preferences into actionable information for companies. What we offer, then, is not a comprehensive description of new or digital media, but an understanding of what qualities of new media are valued by and taken up by companies that primarily operate in traditional, physical spaces.

^{vii} See, for example, the several hundred screens in the U.S. that maintain exclusively film projection (Corcoran 2015) or installed 70mm film projectors post their digital transition (Wilkinson 2017), along with the wide variety of digitized loyalty programs run by different theater chains.

^{viii} Machine-directed changes to ways of knowing and interacting with audiences affected management staff all the way down to singular theaters. For example, a 1998 *Variety* profile on Robert Garcia, the managing director of AMC's 30-screen megaplex in Covina, California, characterizes the substance of Garcia's job as "throwing a high-tech party for up to 15,000 people. Every day." From his central computer system, Garcia explained, "I can monitor how we're doing on any given day almost to the minute... This is a pretty scientific business these days" (Grove 1998).

^{ix} AMC has since shifted to a tiered loyalty program, offering three levels of participation: Stubs Insider, which is free and offers minor rewards like refills on popcorn; Stubs Premiere, which costs \$15 annually, offers priority lines, concession upgrades, and \$5 back on every \$50 spent; and AMC A-List, a \$20 per month subscription which includes all Premiere benefits plus up to three movie tickets a week.

^x MovieFone was an interactive automated telephone system that people could call in order to get information about showtimes, upcoming movies, and, in some markets, purchase tickets over the phone.

^{xi} Carmike and Cineplex have removed their corporate Facebook pages. Back in May of 2015, Carmike had 560,000 likes and Cineplex had 414,000 likes.