# All the World's a Stage: The Multiplicity of Audience

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In this article, Zack Dukic discusses the reader's potential membership in target audiences using examples from ISU campus and articles from prominent news outlets. Awareness of one's inclusion in a target audience is not always obvious, but through active reading and with the help of the Activity Triangle, an individual can realize their agency as a member of a target audience.

You are a member of multiple audiences—sometimes simultaneously—during any given day. Social media is the most obvious example of simultaneous participation in multiple audiences; as you scroll through Facebook you are targeted by advertisements, your friends' posts, posts of groups you follow, and news articles, just to name a few. But the multiplicity of audience isn't just virtual. Consider all of the flyers posted around campus, the chalk advertisements on the grounds around the quad, or the shops and restaurants of downtown Normal with their sales and specials taped up on their windows. These examples are not just arbitrary productions, they are made specifically with *you*, the target audience[1], in mind. Recognizing yourself as a member of multiple target audiences is an awareness that can keep you from being manipulated by reporting and marketing language.

It is important to be aware of the nuances and variations in the language that surrounds you every day. This is the same type of awareness used when analyzing a literary production or a text of any kind really. The trick is to

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1. Target Audience: "A particular group at which a product [or service] . . . is aimed" (definition from lexico.com)

**Antecedent knowledge** is the information and skills you already possess that can be applied to a new task. Whenever you try something new, you depend on what you know to guide you. So, despite whether or not you think you're prepared, in a lot of ways, you already are!

transfer your **antecedent knowledge** about genre analysis to analyzing the details or conventions of the information being presented to you. In this article, I discuss several examples of target audience in news articles and advertisements. Both news articles and advertisements are genres with specific conventions that identify them as such, and they share important characteristics that make them good genres for analyzing audience. The objective they share isn't necessarily obvious but is no less important despite its subtlety. News articles and advertisements are trying to convince you of something. This is obvious with an advertisement (i.e., whatever is being advertised can fill a need you have), but less so with news articles, which on the surface can be seen as informative rather than persuasive. However, there are distinct choices involved in the production of a news article that inform your interpretation of the content. With a careful analysis, the connection between the genre's characteristics (terminology, visuals, content, distribution choices, etc.) and its goals (to inform or persuade—or both) can become more clear, and this sort of investigation can help us understand how these genres work to shape the thinking and/or behavior of their target audience.



Figure 1: Stevenson Hall bulletin board.

## Multiplicity of "Audience"

I took a walk around the ISU quad, making my way from the State Farm Hall of Business to the Bone Student Center, and, along the way, I took pictures of different advertisements around campus. Usually, I don't pay any mind to all the flyers and other ads when I'm walking from building to building, but I found that when I actually went out looking for them, that there were too many to count! I took far more pictures than could be included in this article, and I was also surprised by how much I noticed through simply paying attention. There were the bulletin boards with all sorts of flyers attached as well as stationary signs and ads posted; on storefront windows, hanging off of buildings, and all over the place in the Student Center.

Consider Figure 1 above. All of the flyers in Figure 1 were made with you in mind! Just from a brief glance at them I found some commonalities: bright colors, dynamic imagery, and large print. In the discussion that follows, I will analyze a few examples in detail and try to identify the multiple audiences targeted by the production while also noting the **genre conventions** of advertisements.

Awareness of genre conventions is how you understand the differences between genres and can also reveal the audience being targeted by the genre. For example, bright colors, dynamic imagery, and large print are all conventions which are attention-grabbing conventions and immediately demonstrate that the target audience at the most inclusive level is anyone whose attention can be momentarily arrested by the advertisement. Let's take a closer look at that bulletin board!

> **Genre conventions** are the answers to the questions: what features do different examples of a particular genre have in common? Do these features help to distinguish this genre from another one? Looking at multiple examples of a genre can help you to spot conventions, and many of them you identify without even thinking about it! For example, conventions can help us to spot the difference between a page from a book and a page from a newspaper.
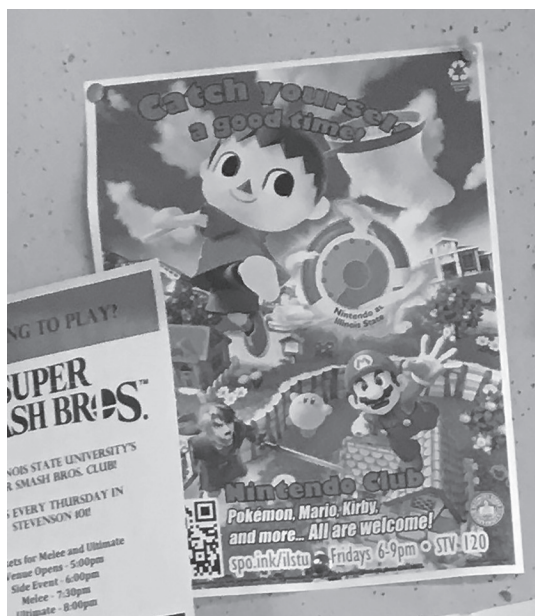
The flyers in Figures 2 and 3 are from the bulletin board in Stevenson Hall (Figure 1), and both target multiple audiences. The first audience I could identify would be college students; after all, these flyers are posted on a college campus in a university building. While there are also university employees in this space, looking closely, we can see that these ads are definitely more oriented toward the student population: Figure 2 is an advertisement for the
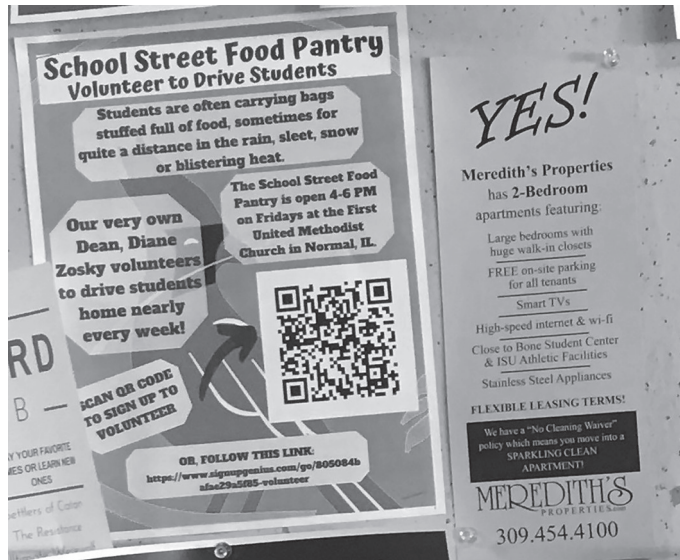


Figure 2: Nintendo Club flyer

Figure 3: Food Pantry and Meredith's Properties flyers.

"Nintendo Club," and clubs generally are meant for student participants. We can identify more target audiences by further scrutinizing the flyer. Not only is this flyer meant for the student population, but more specifically the students who play video games. Though some may think all young adults play video games, this is not the case. We can identify another more specific target audience: students who play video games and are fans of *Nintendo* games. The ad is for the "Nintendo Club," so at the most specific level, it is targeting students who are fans of Nintendo video game franchises, but more generally it is targeting students who play video games, and even more generally it is simply targeting the student population. We've just identified three target audiences for a single flyer and there are probably many more of them on this billboard alone! Any given student could be a member of one or all three audiences targeted by this flyer.

In Figure 3, the "Meredith's Properties" ad states that their two-bedroom apartments are "close to the Bone Student Center & ISU Athletic Facilities" and feature "FLEXIBLE LEASING TERMS!" There is nothing that explicitly targets students. I mean, university employees need a place to live too, right? However, the specifics of the ad above are more applicable to students than employees. Being in close proximity to the Student Center is more relevant to students, who are more likely to have a need to go there. The same could be said of the reference to the athletic facilities; employees surely use these facilities but any given day the majority of the people there are students. The biggest giveaway that this ad is meant more for the

student population is the capitalized and exclaimed "FLEXIBLE LEASING TERMS!." Employees are generally looking for a living situation that is more stable since they will be living and working in the area. Students, on the other hand, may complete their degree in two to four years and then move on to another place. Month-to-month or six-month leases could be more appealing to students because employees are usually looking to stay where they are living for a longer period of time. We can also narrow this ad down into several target audiences: the university population (students and employees), the part of that population who own vehicles ("FREE on-site parking for all tenants"), the student population, and more specifically the student population with a variable time frame (e.g., students close to graduation).

The other ad in Figure 3, the "School Street Food Pantry," isn't so much targeting students in general as it is university employees or students who could volunteer. Though the Food Pantry is for students and it does mention when the pantry will be open, the majority of the space on the ad is oriented towards those who can volunteer "to drive students home." By referencing Dean Diane Zosky and the "distance in the rain, sleet, snow or blistering heat" that students sometimes have to walk through, the ad is meant to encourage possible volunteers. We can narrow the target audiences of this ad down from the university population (students and employees) to students or employees who have vehicles and then further to students or employees who have vehicles and want to volunteer.

All three of these ads share distinct genre conventions, some of which are: some application of color (none are simply white paper with black texts), dynamic print with different fonts and sizes, exclamation points for emphasis, reasons to consider their content (e.g., "Catch yourself a good time!"), and how to contact someone if interested. Identification of these conventions not only makes us aware that these examples all belong to the genre of advertisements but also helps us to be more aware of who these ads are targeting. The more exclusive the target audience, the more specific the conventions. For example, the Nintendo Club's most exclusive audience are fans of the Nintendo company's video games, which is revealed by the most specific conventions: character imagery and distinct terminology. These conventions could apply to any advertisement flyer (think about the School Street Food Pantry from Figure 3 with the background imagery of a red bird) but are used in a specific way to target an exclusive audience. Genre conventions can simultaneously target both a general, inclusive audience (e.g., bright colors) as well as a more specific, exclusive audience (e.g., a brightly colored character).

**Transfer of learning** is when we re-use, adapt, and transform our existing knowledge from a previous situation or activity to a new one.

## Variations in Reporting Language

Now, let's **transfer** our analytical skills from the genre of advertisements to the genre of news articles. First, we'll take a look at the titles of four news articles (two from CNN and two from FOX) posted online to identify variations in reporting language.

On October 3, 2019, there was a knife attack at the police headquarters in the city of Paris, France. The same day, CNN reported: "Four killed in knife attack at Paris police headquarters" (Vandoorne and Crouin). On the same day, Fox News reported: "Paris knife attack in police station kills at least 4, including 3 officers, assailant shot dead: officials" (Sorace). We can see there are discrepancies in the reporting language; CNN's article title is less descriptive but more accurate as the attack did occur at the police headquarters and not just a police station. Fox's article elaborates on who has been killed and also makes the distinction that the attacker is dead while citing its sources ("officials"). A key difference between the titles is that the CNN title does not refer to the attacker. This could lead to the interpretation that the situation is ongoing. The Fox article title, on the other hand, specifies "assailant shot dead," orienting the reader to the interpretation that the situation has ended. Each of these news outlets made specific choices, and their article titles shape the audience's interpretation of the event being reported. Now, let's look at another example of discrepancy in reporting language.

On October 6, 2019, CNN News posted an article titled, "Pope opens meeting that could lead to some married men becoming priests" (Gallagher and John). The next day, Fox News posted, "Catholic Church to debate married men becoming priests." In this instance, CNN's article title is more descriptive and more accurate than the Fox article title. Both articles are about a meeting called by the Pope to discuss allowing married men to become priests in a specific region of South America—one that is suffering from a shortage of priests. By directly stating the "*Pope* opens meeting" and "*some* married men," the CNN article title is much clearer about what the content will describe, while the Fox article title is more vaguely worded, less direct, and could lead to the interpretation that the whole of the Catholic Church is considering allowing married men to be priests. This type of interpretation could illicit strong emotions from readers and immediately skew their reading of the article as they align themselves against or for it only after reading the title and not the actual content of the article.

These are two brief examples of how language can orient a reader's interpretation of the information reported on. Applying an analytical perspective (just like when analyzing a genre!) when reading a news article can

make clear the interpretation of the content that the writers are attempting. As a reader, you need to be ready to situate yourself as an *active* reader; using genre analysis and rhetorical analysis, you can better understand how the actions and choices of the writer are affecting you as the reader.

## Activity System: Be an Active Reader!

There are many definitions of *active reading*. I would define it as reading with the objective of understanding, analyzing, and engaging with the material in order to comprehend the author's intent.

When active reading is your goal, the tools you have to work with include your antecedent knowledge, which can help you make sense of the image and the different modes found in a single flyer. For example, being literate in the English language allows you to interpret what is written, and how much you are involved in or aware of video game culture helps you to recognize the characters in the picture. Using your antecedent knowledge is the first step in active reading! A second step is to start asking a lot of questions. For example, "Why did the creators of this production choose those characters for the flyer? Are they popular characters? What are they supposed to make people think? Do they make me (or others) think of fun memories or enjoyable times spent playing video games? Could the creators of this flyer have chosen those characters to grab attention and to specifically appeal to a reader's potential (presumably positive) experience with them?"

This advertisement, like most advertisements, is **multimodal**. Not only does it apply the alphabetic mode with written English, but it also utilized the visual mode through imagery.

**Multimodal composing** "specifically refers to ALL of the modes that humans can use to communicate that would include Alphabetic (stuff we write using the alphabet), Visual (pictures), Aural (sound), Oral (spoken), and Symbolic (using symbols that aren't alphabetic, like emoticons or emojis)" (isuwriting.com)." In the case of these flyers, the use of multiple modes communicates different information to different audiences.

In addition, you can use some of the ISU CHAT terms to think in even more complex ways about how the genre is constructed. For example, you can think about the different individuals and groups who might have been involved in the production of these texts. The flyer was most likely sanctioned by the Nintendo Club. Once the image was created it needed to be copied and printed, and then someone, or several people, must have walked around campus posting the copies. All of this was done with its own objective: to promote interest in the Nintendo Club. When the club decided that a flyer was how they would raise awareness for their group, they had to make that decision based on

some expectation about how the community might respond to such a flyer. While making the image, the authors had to consider which modes would best attract people's attention (bright colors, recognizable characters, etc.), and those who posted the flyer around campus would have to consider where the flyer would get the most attention and be seen by the largest number of community members. The rules governing this planning (which in ISU CHAT terms might be understood as **representation**) would abide by the rules and norms of the university; the image posted couldn't be offensive to the community or otherwise cause any kind of disruption with its presence. There are also the rules of the format; they couldn't include anything that didn't fit on that sheet of paper. When we add all these considerations together, we get a thorough understanding of the authors' intent as well as how this production pertains to we, the readers.

It's possible to think about the news articles I've presented using a similar understanding of complex relationships between people, texts, tools, cultures, and situations. For example, the rules governing news articles posted online are also determined by institutional regulations. Neither of these news outlets would post an article with profanity in the title (unless it was edited appropriately; e.g., sh*t) because that could be offensive to the reader. The rules of format would apply here as well. Article titles, especially news articles, need to be short and descriptive so as to catch the reader's attention with just a few words. The community, in this case, is much larger than just a university community; the online articles posted by these news outlets, are read all over the world. Though they are primarily targeting American audiences (they are American news outlets after all), both CNN and Fox must maintain an awareness that their content reaches people across the globe. In addition, a text with this kind of global reach involves a much wider range of people in its **production**: the reporters (who can be all over the world), the editors (who work with the content and format of the story), the technicians (who make sure the articles are posted online appropriately), editors (who decide if the article will be published on the website), and other stakeholders. Each step and decision can include multiple people. In addition, the articles referenced previously used multiple modes. This included alphabetic and image modalities, but also the aural mode. On the website, there was the option to play a video in which the story was reported using video and audio. The modality or modes used can help to further reveal the scope or intent of a production. For example, the option to receive the news articles' information through the aural mode further extends the possible audience of that content (i.e., someone who is visually impaired or unable to read). As *active readers*, while we read, we think about all the effort that goes into what we read (e.g., a news article or an advertisement), the reasons these texts were created, and how specific choices affect our interpretation.

## Agency of Audience

The writer does not have all the power in the production of a text; as the audience, we also have power! The most important consideration, for most writers, is their target audience. Thus, as a (possible) member of that audience, you are actually influencing the writer's efforts through your expected reception of the material. Whether you agree/disagree or enjoy/dislike the text is incidental, regardless of the reception you were a consideration in the production of that text. If all the students on ISU's campus who played Nintendo video games agreed that Yoshi was the best Nintendo character, the next Nintendo Club flyer would undoubtedly include an image of Yoshi. That's the agency of audience; while an individual rarely influences the production of a text meant to reach hundreds (or thousands or millions!) of people, the audience that individual belongs to is actually the most influential consideration in the production of such a text.

Awareness of your agency as a target audience member can keep you from being misled, duped, or manipulated by the multimodal advertisements and news articles that are targeting you. If you see a flyer with bright colors, you don't have to keep looking at it. If you read a news article and disagree with how its content is presented, then you'll know that article might have been written with a different audience in mind. Though these options can seem obvious, you may be surprised how often your attention is diverted without you thinking about it. Next time you're scrolling through Instagram or Facebook, think about what you do when ads or news articles appear. Do you scroll past them? Probably yes, most of the time. But every so often you watch or read them because they capture your attention. This is because of the efforts of multiple people and institutions utilizing specific modes and conventions in these productions, in an attempt to influence your opinions or actions. Being an active reader means discerning the intent of a production so that you can decide whether and how to respond, fully aware of the effect it is meant to have on you.

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