

Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press Journals Division.

Our guest today is Scott Kushner, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Rhode Island's Harrington School of Communication and Media. His scholarship and teaching explore the ways overlooked media give shape to our everyday encounters with culture. His work has appeared in venues including *Space and Culture*, *Convergence*, and *New Media and Society*. Most recently, he published a paper in the journal *Technology and Culture* titled "Controlling Crowds: On the Technological Management of Entertainment Audiences." We sat down with him to learn more about how technology plays a role in the way a crowd becomes an audience.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Kushner. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk about this really interesting work that you're doing.

Scott Kushner

Thanks, Mary Alice. It's really a treat to be with you today.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The first question we always like to ask our guests is, can you tell us your academic origin story? How did you get to focus on your specific area of academic research?

Scott Kushner

So, my origin story, I guess, is both highly unusual and totally difficult. It's unusual in the sense that it's taken these kind of zigs and zags over the years. My background is all in the humanities. My training was all in literary studies. My PhD is in French lit, of all things. And I was very fortunate to be in a wonderful graduate program in French at Duke. I had a fantastic advisor in Lindo Orr and worked with some really wonderful scholars like David Bell and Alice Kaplan. And over the course of my time there, I shifted to media and cultural studies around 2005.

Midway through, I sort of found my interests were shifting to politics and to technology. So, I did a dissertation on political blogs in France and the US, did fieldwork in Paris in 2007 for the Sarkozy election. And so, it's kind of been the last, I don't know—15 or 20 years or so has been a shift sort of using the kinds of skills and training that I had in literary studies in terms of close reading and theory from the European traditions mostly and porting those from literary texts into a broader notion of culture. And increasingly for me, an attraction to different sorts of technologies and media.

So, in that way, it was kind of unusual. It's been anything but a straight line. And then it's also been typical in that it's been anything but a straight line (laughter) in that I completed my graduate work in 2009, which was not a great time to finish a PhD. And it took me about six years of working as an adjunct and more consistently in kind of para-academic or alt-ac, positions as they call them, until I was really lucky as most of us on the tenure track are, it's as much luck as anything else. I was able to find myself a really nice job at a nice institution with great colleagues. I'm at the University of Rhode Island and I've got the privilege of doing the kinds of research and writing and teaching that I long to do for many years. So, it's been a funny path, but it's been a good one and it's a good life.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I love it. And I just said this to our last guest on the podcast. It's one of the reasons I asked the question is because I think, especially younger scholars and folks that are figuring out, even undergrads talking about what's your major and all that kind of stuff—I'm trying to express to people that everyone answers like, “Oh, it was this crazy winding path.” You don't have to have everything laid out. Having it happen organically is really, I think, sometimes brings you to much more interesting and creative places in terms of your career. So, thank you for answering the question. There's no right answer to the question, but I'm consistently getting similar answers, which is like, “It just kind of fell in my lap.”

Scott Kushner

Some people take a real straight line and that has its advantages.

Mary Alice Yeskey

True. True, true. But it's not a negative thing to, you know—not all who wander are lost.

Scott Kushner

No, not necessarily.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Exactly. Exactly. So, your paper in the journal *Technology and Culture* traces the history of technological advancement of crowd control in entertainment venues, stadiums, music venues, theaters. Was there a particular artifact or piece of research that sparked that interest? What kind of lit that curiosity in you?

Scott Kushner

So, as is the case, I think with most journal articles, this is part of a larger project that's to do with the performance venue as a media technology that channels content to audiences and also audiences to producers. And so, it's about those two kinds of channeling and the cultural and societal effects of both of those processes. And the whole thing did start with an artifact, but not one that's discussed in this paper. It started with a ticket. I wanted to go to a rock concert and they had the audacity to sell all the tickets before I got mine. (laughter) And I was annoyed and I wanted to know how it worked. So, I started digging into what exactly is a ticket? What kind of an artifact is it? What kind of a technology is it? And that started me down this

research path that changed my intellectual trajectory, changed the kinds of work that I do, led me to put a book project that I had been working on the kind of on the back burner.

And I've been working on this project since about 2016, I want to say, so I guess six or seven years now, a piece of that work on ticketing, which, that will figure as a good portion of this book, but a piece of it came out a few years back in *Space and Culture*, which is another journal that I absolutely love and was thrilled to be able to play some work in. What I learned as I was doing that is that one of the things tickets do is they control access and enforce decisions about who enters. So, I started thinking about other technologies that do the same thing. I held a Smithsonian Lemelson Travel to Collections Fellowship at the National Museum of American History, which is on the mall in Washington.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, yeah, very familiar, just down the road.

Scott Kushner

Just down the road from you. Yeah, it's a great museum every day. When I went to work there, I got to walk by the Batmobile. The staff is awesome. I worked with Allison Oswald, who's an amazing archivist and really like incredibly knowledgeable about the collections and able to sort of work with researchers if you have the chance to go in and do some work there. It's absolutely a joy to spend time there. So, I was there to do a bunch of ticketing research and spend a bunch of time in the archives collections there. While I was there, I got to—they snuck me upstairs, which was an adventure in and of itself. It's like you take this elevator and you get up and it's not like the same sort of public-facing space, you know, like shiny walls and floors and glass displays. It's working space.

And they've got this library up there, and in the library, they have a collection of trade catalogs. And I was poking through catalogs to do with ticketing equipment. And the staff there also said, “You know, you might want to look at this stuff, too.” And so, there was material on turnstiles and bleachers and barriers, and that material kind of became the core of this project, eventually combined with other materials from the Hackley Museum and Library, which is in Wilmington, Delaware. So just headed the other direction. And then some stuff, I think some stuff came from Yale, some stuff, I want to say came from Texas A&M, maybe or maybe or no, no, it wasn't. I think it was the University of Texas at San Antonio. That's where it was. I didn't get to go there. But the special collection staff, they were kind enough to scan some materials and send them to me.

So, I kind of put that all in a pot and stirred it up and yada, yada, yada, there's a paper in *Space and Culture*, whichever you should read.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's so—and I will. That's fascinating. And as soon as you started talking about ticketing, I was reminded of a recent—I went to a show, and I'd gotten the email for the tickets and I—you know, just like you buy them online and they send you the email. I tend to fumble when you

have your ticket on your phone because you have to frequently, like, increase your brightness and there's people behind you. So, I just printed the tickets out on a piece of paper. And the gentleman at the door, truly my hand to God burst out laughing at me and said, "You printed them out?" And I said, "Yes, I did." And he was just like, "OK." And I said, "I am 40-something years old and I'm going to print my tickets."

Scott Kushner

There's one in every crowd. I mean, one of the things that I've been interested in is, you know, the ticket is an artifact that dates back to like, 17th century, we think. It's you know—there's some dispute as to when the first theater ticket was issued. And the big obvious change in our lifetime has been the shift away from a material support—away from the paper that you use at that show to some kind of a digital or, you know, what we understand to be a non-physical support, although it actually is very much physical.

And one of the consequences of this is to do with the ways that the ticketing agents or the infrastructure that supports the ticketing credential that we hold in our hands, they can sort of do things to it that they weren't able to do before in terms of imposed restrictions on what you're allowed to do with it. So, if it's not a paper ticket, if it's just an entry in a database somewhere that tells your phone to display something at the right moment, it sets new rules about what you're allowed to do with it. Are you able to give it to a friend? When can you do that? Are you able to sell it? Under what terms are you able to sell it? At what time are you able to sell it?

And then there's also what they refer to as security features that have effects on how you use it, when you use it, and even what form you use it in. So, when you were telling your story about using a printout of the ticket, many of the tickets—so you can print a PDF sometimes of the ticket, but many of them are actually within like a gated garden or a walled garden kind of environment in an app.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Interface, yeah.

Scott Kushner

And those barcodes will change. They'll turnover sometimes every 60 or 90 seconds, precisely to prevent somebody from printing it or more likely from screenshotting it and giving a screenshot to a friend so that they can enter or they can get into a better, you know, a better section of seating or something like that. So, every 90 seconds it's a new code, which means your printout wouldn't have gotten you in.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Well, this was a tiny little show, but yeah, interesting. And I'm now—I'm thinking, and I'm again, this is, I'm just going off on a tangent now, but now I'm thinking about the artifacts as souvenirs, you know, all of this Ticketmaster stubs I have from the nineties squirreled away in a box somewhere in my closet. And like, every once in a while, I go through and I'm like, "Oh, I

remember this show.” And it's like, that doesn't—my kids won't have that. And I don't know, there's like, I'm sad about that in a funny way.

Scott Kushner

So, there's a solution to that, which is that there's been—I don't think it's, it's really taken off yet, but the desire that you were describing for the collectible is something that is common. You're not the only one who has that and want to have the material thing to save as a memento or to collect as evidence of fandom or just of having been there. And there have been some attempts to sell as an add-on a paper ticket, which doesn't allow you to get in. It does allow you to collect it, does allow you to keep it in a shoebox or—

Mary Alice Yeskey

They give you a PDF.

Scott Kushner

No, they'll actually mail you—

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, they'll send you—oh, they'll send you—

Scott Kushner

They send you a ticket. And all it really is it's like a commemorative token on ticket stock.

Mary Alice Yeskey

It's like commemorative coins. They're not actually legal tender. They just are there to celebrate the thing.

Scott Kushner

Precisely. Yeah. So, I've seen some of this. I actually had a paper—I think this one was in *Convergence* a few years back—that was about—it was about the shift from materially tangible recordings to intangible recording streaming audio, which are materialized elsewhere, but to us on the user end, we don't, we don't feel them as anything we can touch. And I was looking at one fan community, a particularly rabid fan community that had the habit of collecting recordings of live performance who were—with technological shifts—they were stripped of the ability to maintain those collections. It became centralized in a streaming app. And so, the band's management saw that the fans who had the habit of collecting things suddenly couldn't collect the thing that they had become accustomed to collecting.

So, they started selling them more things that they could collect that were associated with individual performances, like, you know, show-specific t-shirts, show-specific coins or merit badges or things like that, anything that they could imagine. And eventually, tickets because they weren't giving people paper tickets any longer. So, the ticket, because it is this tangible thing that we collect. But as you saw that day, when you walked in with the PDF, it's a piece of this bigger technological system. So, like, the ticket works with the turnstile works with the

ticket taker works with the computer database that verifies the ticket, collaborates with the hallway that you walk through and eventually whatever—the doorway any ushers that you encounter any railings or walkways, lighting design, sound design every aspect of the venue in some sense is meant to channel you in a certain mode of comportment into the space where the performance takes place and then encourage you to behave in a certain way while you're in that space. So, all of these technologies are kind of part of this larger apparatus of crowd control.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah. I thank you. And that perfectly segues to what I was actually going to ask you next, which is reading your paper. You know, you talk about all that, you talk about how these turnstiles and barriers and seats are wrapped into that idea that the crowd, and I'm quoting here, “can be sifted, their bodies calmed and organized, their energies channeled to profit, and their potential for violence dissipated,” which really just floored me really.

It sort of struck me because I have always very naively assumed that everything in a venue is designed for safety. I always assumed it was just in the sense that we don't want to stampede. We want people to navigate a small space safely, but I'm curious in terms of sort of like how the turnstiles and the barriers work to calm and organize truly for the financial benefit of the venue. And I was hoping you could speak a little more on that and how you see these technologies through that lens and to that end.

Scott Kushner

Yeah. Well, I mean, I guess the first thing is to disentangle the idea that the safety of the crowd and the financial benefit of the venue are not the same thing. So, I mean, they're the famous kind of crowd control disasters like the Altamont Festival in 1969 or the Hillsborough stampede in England, instances where a crowd of people did in one way or another crush, trample, kill intentionally or unintentionally, you know, become agitated, become disorderly—

Mary Alice Yeskey

Uncontrollable.

Scott Kushner

—as the venues would put it, uncontrollable. And that is, among other things, not particularly good for business. No venue operator wants to be known as, “Oh, it's the place where you go if you'd like to be trampled.”

Mary Alice Yeskey

The place where this thing happened

Scott Kushner

The place where this thing happened is not a good look for a theater.

Mary Alice Yeskey

(laughter) Exactly, you're not going to put that on the wall. Yeah. Right. Right.

Scott Kushner

No. So safety is very much part of the work and part of the goal of these technologies, the reasons why venue operators will deploy them. But it's not the only one. I mean, these things are kind of—they have multiple motivations and multiple effects. So, there is that safety dimension, but turnstiles especially, they're kind of the most visible and most obvious mechanism that I write about in this paper. They've also got this function of organizing the crowd by atomizing it. So, this idea—I am kind of inspired by this German historian of technology named Stefan Höhne, who—he wrote this book on the New York subway, which is really good, and he has this piece about turnstiles, which he describes as apparatuses of separation.

So, the idea is that on one side of the turnstile, you've got this crowd, this undifferentiated crowd, and then it gets processed as it passes through the turnstiles. And you go through a turnstile, if you're using them the right way, you go through them one at a time. And so, on one side, you've got this mass, and on the other side, you've got this rationalized stream of audience members that passes through to the other side. And just as a side note here, this work that the turnstile is doing is actually a form of mediation, as media theory would understand it. And so, this is coming out of the German media theory tradition, which is largely in the States known as, under the name of Friedrich Kittler, the kind of historian of media.

There's these three functions that media technologies will execute. Some of them are obvious to us, storage, so like a record stores things that we recognize as sound or film stores images, book stores text. Another is transmission. So, a radio transmitter will broadcast a signal, or a pipe will transmit water. But then the third function, and it's the one that Kittler himself probably spends the least time talking about, is processing. And processing is the idea that something goes in and something different comes out the other side. So, this is what a computer does, or it's what an encoder or a decoder does in an audio processing tool, or a video processing tool, or in a turnstile. The crowd goes in and the audience comes out. So, it has this effect of processing. It's been slowed down, it's been broken up.

And the trade literature that I was consulting on turnstiles and companion technologies like barriers and stanchions and rope lines, it's just full of words like calm and order. These were explicitly marketed as devices that settled audiences down. Turnstiles are often paired in performance venues with attendance and ticket takers, like the guy who laughed at you. (laughter) They're acting as enforcers. They're not just laughing. They're sort of like, they're a sign of—

Mary Alice Yeskey

They're guardians.

Scott Kushner

They're guardians. They're there to signify the power that the venue is imposing upon people who want to come in that we're watching, we're making decisions about whether your ticket is valid or not. Do you have the right code? Is it for the right day? Is it a fake? Is it on the right kind of medium? Is it on paper or a screen? Will they accept it on paper? This ticket taker is making these decisions, usually with a smile, at least these days, for many crowds. And sometimes they're wearing a uniform or a name tag, something that marks them as somehow holding some power within this space to execute this duty.

And they might point you in one direction or another, and maybe not in a smaller venue like the one you described, but certainly in a theater or a musical.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Upstairs, downstairs, yeah.

Scott Kushner

You go to the left, you go to the right, whatever. They're sorting bodies out. And so, paired with the turnstile, they're executing these decisions, not only the binary in-out decision, but also this broader set of decisions about which bodies gets the credential link device that helps them make this decision, and then the turnstile is the processing device that slows that crowd down and allows it to be sifted. Later on, barriers like rope lines and railings offer psychological cues about where to go. I mean, you can jump the rope.

Mary Alice Yeskey

True that.

Scott Kushner

We probably all have, but you usually don't. So, both the turnstile manufacturers and the stanchion manufacturers, they talk about this psychological effect of the barrier. And most of the time when we're in these performance venues, we're not encountering these like airtight barriers or these 10-foot fences. We're usually encountering things like ropes or things like railings. The Perry Turnstile Company, which is one of the oldest and still, I think one of the largest turnstile manufacturers in the US and probably the world, they even say that people respond better, more calmly, which is what they mean by better, to an environmental cue, like a railing, than they do to a verbal instruction. People don't want to be told what to do.

Mary Alice Yeskey

They want to be suggested.

Scott Kushner

But they're usually pretty pliant if they're sort of gently corralled in one direction or another. Natasha Dow Schüll has written about this in her book on Las Vegas casinos. She has this really cool passage about the hallway.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, yeah. I can see that. Yeah, yeah. You enter and it's the smell and everything about it. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Scott Kushner

Right. So, these environmental cues can have great effect on how we behave and how we act, where we go and what speed we go and which way we go. All of this equipment has this effect of transforming that mass of people on one side into a calm, rationalized audience on the other.

Mary Alice Yeskey

This is so fascinating to me. And there is a whole other conversation about Southwest airlines that I want to have with you, but we don't have the time for that today. But I'm thinking about that, too. And about like the ABC and when people try to speak in and they're like, "This is only for B," and I just, I don't know, I just, I find all of this so fascinating.

Scott Kushner

Yeah. I'll just, I won't—because I know time is precious, but I will say that the intellectual infrastructure on which the ticketing experience that we have today with companies like Ticketmaster, especially the pricing structures. So, Ticketmaster has gotten really into dynamic pricing over the last few years, which is infuriating.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Dynamic is such a nice word. (laughter)

Scott Kushner

It's a nice word and they're really good at it. And the bands who want you to think that they're on your side, they actually love it because they're getting all the money that the brokers used to get. But all that technology is old technology and it's old math and old science. It was developed in the seventies when the airlines were deregulated. They used it first.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, fascinating. So, it is connected.

Scott Kushner

Yield management.

Mary Alice Yeskey

They call it what?

Scott Kushner

Yield management. They're textbooks. I mean, it's been decades they've been doing it. Ticketmaster and the other ticketing companies, they've wanted to do it for years and years and years, but they ran into social friction, especially around popular music where the artists

like to position themselves culturally on the side of the audience. So, they depressed their—they would depress their ticket prices in order to maintain that appearance. The market actually pushed the ticket prices up, which is what made ticket brokers really wealthy and continues to make them very wealthy.

Mary Alice Yeskey

So, another moment in your paper, as I was reading it, that really struck me was you talk about how seats and turnstiles are used to enforce racial and class segregation. That didn't surprise me, but you, and again, I'm quoting you, "Each structure is associated with hierarchies of control." And I'm curious how these hierarchies still exist in entertainment spaces today.

Scott Kushner

Yeah, I mean, they do. It's mostly the same equipment or the descendants of that equipment. And I think we can see those hierarchies if we look for them, they're just being enforced in a more subtle way. And the framework, the broader cultural framework that they're inserted in is one where we've really—we've come to be naturalized to the idea of price-based discrimination. And we've come to be naturalized to the idea that everything has a price. Everything can be bought, everything can be sold, anything can be commoditized. So, the technologies that enforced the legal regime of racial segregation in the 19th and 20th centuries in the U.S., it's still operating.

The way that I think you can see this probably most clearly is in the architectural design of recent sports venues. It's really visible there in part, just because they're so big. So, like everything is so big. So, these new stadiums and arenas and ballparks, they are centered on creating segregated audience experiences that are based on class or at least based on ability and willingness to pay, which often overlaps with race and with age and with gender. And this isn't really new. So, Chad Seifried, who's a—I guess he's a sociologist of sport. He's done a lot of work on how early baseball parks, you know, dating back to the 1890s, they would segregate audiences by class. They would, you know—so this is kind of the origin of like the bleachers, which were far from the field and, and, you know, the nice grandstand seats, which were close by—that was really a means of class segregation.

And he actually writes about how the rules by which baseball is played today were unsurprisingly fluid in the late 19th century. There were a couple of different sets of rules. I'm not a sport historian, so I'm probably going to get this wrong. But I believe the rules we know today were originated from some rules that were used in Massachusetts. And it seems that now I might be sort of like blending some of my media studies mind with the sport history. Baseball was the logical sport for that moment in media history because the media that existed to bring a large crowd into that performance space was the stadium. In the 1890s, there were newspapers—print existed clearly. And there were lots of newspapers that had an increasingly literate public to sell to. But there was no radio, and there was no television. So, the medium that you could use to bring a game to lots of people at one time was a building, it was a stadium.

So, this is the moment when the ballpark emerges. And baseball becomes this really key sport at this moment in American cultural and economic history because it's played primarily in one corner of a large field. So, since all the action takes place, mostly in that 90-foot square diamond at one corner of the field, you can place a premium on the seats that are around that corner of the field and sell that to upper-class customers. And then the further you get away from that diamond, all the way to the bleachers out in left field, those become seats that you can sell to a more popular crowd, to a more working-class crowd at a lower price point.

So, this isn't new. What we're seeing today, though, is the creation of what I think of as almost like a walled garden, like a venue within a venue. So, these new stadiums and sports arenas, they will often take the seating sections that are nearest to the action, not only sell them at a higher price point, they'll also kind of close them off within the venue, they'll sort of erect those barriers—

Mary Alice Yeskey

The boxes.

Scott Kushner

Yeah, the boxes, but not just the boxes. So, I was looking at the, I think it's called, what do they call it now? It was the Key Center, it was the Seattle Arena, it's in downtown Seattle. I think it's Climate Pledge Arena is what they call it now, that's what they sell the rights to.

Mary Alice Yeskey

It'll be different by the time this airs, probably.

Scott Kushner

In all likelihood, yeah, I'm sure the climate pledge will be broken by then. (laughter) So, they redesigned and rebuilt this arena, it's an old building, I think the building dates to the 60s or 70s.

Mary Alice Yeskey

This is an indoor sports arena?

Scott Kushner

Yeah, it's where—I think they played basketball there. I think this is the third iteration of it, and it's this land—if you've been to Seattle, you may have seen it, it's near the Space Needle, it's got this really like, kind of like this peaked roof—it's a really striking building on the outside, I haven't been inside. When they redesigned these buildings, they usually don't do that much to the outside, it's really the inside that matters because the inside is where you can control your revenue streams.

So, what they've done with this building is on either side of the court, on the long side of the court, right by the court, they've taken three sections of seating, the entire length of the court, right down by the action and turn them into what they call club seating. So, this isn't like a few

boxes at the front, it's the entire like 20 or 25 rows, starting at the court and working your way, you know, up toward the top of the arena. They're separated by a railing from the sections on either side, they start to wrap around the baskets. Not only have they separated them by this railing, behind those sections, there's this large open space that has restaurants, bars, socializing areas, bathrooms, staffed by private attendants, enforced by ticketed entry.

So the people who hold the tickets, which are sold at a higher price point, often held by season ticket holders, they have access to this sort of privileged space that is separate from not only in the seats, but also—

Mary Alice Yeskey

The whole experience.

Scott Kushner

—the concourse, their entire experience is segregated from the experience of the people who are behind the baskets, and certainly for the people who are upstairs, up in the balconies. So, the technologies that enforce the segregation are the same. The ticket, the turnstile, the barrier, the rope line, the door, the bouncer, the usher.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, I'm thinking about the money, it's like, yes, they have the money and the means to buy those tickets, but it's also, you're buying that buffered experience, but you're also buying not having to interact with anybody else. Do you know what I mean? That's where I see your point so clearly because you're buying your own bubble of keeping the people you want around you around you and all the riffraff away.

Scott Kushner

Very much so. And that language that you're describing, that's also not new. So, one of the reasons these ballpark owners that are described in the late 19th century, one of the reasons they wanted to segregate the bleachers from the grandstands was it was a nice way to sell different priced tickets and make some money selling a lot of tickets to a large number of people at a low price and some money selling a relatively small number of people at a high price to nice receipts.

But another reason was the upper crust didn't want to mix with the hoi polloi. They wanted their experience to be separate. Baseball provides a really easy way to do that because you put the nice price tickets in this one little corner, and then you put the rabble or whatever derogative term they used in that decade to describe the folks who sit out in the bleachers.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The groundlings.

Scott Kushner

The groundlings, certainly, as they were known in Shakespeare's time. And then the basketball arena in Seattle and presumably all over the country, basketball arenas and football stadiums, these new soccer stadiums, which major league soccer teams are putting up all over the country, all include these amenities which are tied to the seat in order to segregate the attendees, if not by class or race or gender, then certainly by means and ability to pay, which is closely bound up with class and race and gender and age as well. So yeah, I think, to answer your question, I think those structures that enforce hierarchies of control, yeah, I think they're very much active today, and we're so acculturated to that logic that I don't know if we see it.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right. And I mean, yeah, that's what before, right when we first started this call, that's what I said. I said, I don't think I'm ever going to walk into a venue the same way after reading your paper, just the way I just—you know, you sort of look at it and you're like, “Oh, look there in the balcony with the nice seat,” but now I'm like going to look at it and be like, “This is a system, this is an intentional system.”

Scott Kushner

I apologize for that because it does—it used to be something I did for fun and now it's work.(laughter)

Mary Alice Yeskey

I'm not super into sports, but it never occurred to me until 15 minutes ago that the nature of baseball is one end is where it's happening, you know, and other sports like football, where you've got two end zones, there's—you know, that equalizes where the action is happening and how interesting that is. Soccer, you've got two nets, so things are going to move across, but it's a little bit mind-blowing when you think about how the nature of the action of the sport is shaping how these things are built also, that's just kind of a wow moment for me. So, thank you for that.

Scott Kushner

Yeah, very much. They say that football was the sport that was designed for television and it becomes prominent in the 1960s and into the seventies and, you know, it's clearly a huge, huge industry today with like untold sums of money flowing through it and many of its rules and its choreographies are designed in order to play well to cameras.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And yeah, and it does.

Scott Kushner

I don't watch much football, but the rumor is it really does.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I don't watch much either, but when I glance occasionally now and you see, they've got the cameras on the wires that are doing these like zooming boom shots. I mean, it's cinematic at

this point, it's almost laughable how it's like being filmed. I mean, filmed, filmed like with a capital F it's really quite something from even 20 years ago.

Another, another moment, another sort of question I had after looking at your paper, you talk about how theater seating, in particular, was designed to keep audience members' bodies and feet still which resulted in applause becoming more important to Western theaters. I believe you were quoting another paper there, but I just—that was a moment where I was like, well, of course we've always applauded. That's always been what we did to show support or appreciation for a performance. It just really surprised me that that wasn't always the case. So, I kind of wanted to ask like, what was it like—what did people before theater seating do? Were they just stomping their feet? Were they jumping around? Were they high-fiving? Like how does the—what was the structure doing to still us? What were we doing before that, that necessitated that?

Scott Kushner

Right. It's a great question. So, this is a place where theater historians have done absolutely amazing work preceding me. So, you know, my contribution here is really just to sort of report. The notion of audienceship that we have today, that the audience is there to watch the show quietly and calmly and in the dark, that's relatively new. So, in Europe, earlier theaters were designed as much—as places for audiences to be seen as for audiences to watch. So, like, royal theaters would be organized as much around where the sovereign sat as around the stage. And each audience member was there to be seen and proximity to the king was, was a measure of how much influence or power they had within the social structure.

And so, those buildings were built—I mean, they certainly, you know, they had a stage and there was often a proscenium structure of some sort that would draw attention to the stage, but they were just as much built so that society could exhibit itself to itself as they were built to—

Mary Alice Yeskey

That was half the show. Yeah.

Scott Kushner

Right. Exactly. And then there's also this parallel history, which starts a bit later, of popular theater, a theater that was not necessarily tied to a royal court in England, it was called the legitimate theater. And you know, there was a limited number of them that could operate. They had to be granted patents in order to operate legally. And eventually these produced purpose-built theater buildings for popular audiences. So, the earliest theaters were—some of them were like courtyards or even tennis courts, believe it or not, that had been converted as spaces for theatrical performance. Eventually, we start to get purpose-built theaters that look more like what we'd expect them to look like today. So, I mean, we all remember from high school English learning about Shakespeare's globe theaters, the groundlings, and all the sort of rabble and the activity that's going on down below and the body humor and all that.

So, that's something that I think most of our readers will already know about what going to the theater, at least, was like in moments earlier than ours. It was rather different. We don't have those close seats reserved for the one cent entry or the half pence entry or whatever. Those close seats are usually very valuable and it's the nosebleeds that they go at the low prices or, you know, the half-price tickets and in Times Square or whatever. The conditions—what would it mean to go to a theater performance was those conditions were different in different historical moments. One key text that readers might find interesting is a book by Marc Baer called *Theater and Disorder in Late Georgian England*. It's about 30 years old, but it's a really good read and it's a really—I think it was a really key book in understanding kind of the reception of theater in an earlier historical configuration and also the role of the audience and what it meant to be an audience in that moment.

So, what Baer does in this book is he tells the story of a crowd revolt and basically a strike, an audience strike, against the Covent Garden Theater in London, which had the audacity to raise its prices in 1809, and the crowd, which had been loyal and regular attendees at these theatrical performances, they wanted the old prices back. They call themselves the OPs, the old prices.

Mary Alice Yeskey

(laughter) That's fantastic. Okay.

Scott Kushner

But, the story is as much about crowd control devices, like the ones we've been discussing as it is about the price on the ticket. So, the prices were increased to bankroll improvements that the owner of the theater had made to create better accommodations to theatergoers who were paying for what was perceived to be better seating. They were making nicer boxes and then they tried to fund it by raising the prices. So, the technologies that I'm discussing here in this *Technology and Culture* paper, they were part of a shift in what cultural performance is for.

The idea that it's meant to be seen, that to be an audience member is not to be rowdy, but is to be calm and to be still. So, we see this logic today. It's rehearsed in every ad we see for concerts or for games. You've got to be there in order to see it. You've got to be in the room where it happens, as the song goes. TV's not really good. It's good, but it's not good enough. You've got to be there to watch it, to be present for it, to be a witness to that cultural performance taking place. And most of the language, at least for common ticket buyers, maybe it's different for people in those private boxes, but the language, the discourses around it are not really about socializing. It's about being there. It's about seeing it and hearing it at that moment and in that place.

So, how is it that applause comes to be the mode of reaction, the privileged mode of reaction? It's largely a function of this shift in what performance is for. If it's to be seen and if we're to be calm, then applause is the sanctioned, acceptable way for an audience to react. And there has been—so, Baz Kershaw, who is a theater historian, he's got this really fun piece called *Oh for Unruly Audiences!* which is about this transformation from the rowdy, active audience to the

sort of more constrained and held down audience. And the idea is that audience members' hands are for clapping and their feet are for stomping, but they're not for walking and they're not for marching.

But then there's this undercurrent, which is essentially like you can jump up and down at a concert and you can crowd surf and do mosh-pitying.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Stage dive.

Scott Kushner

Stage dive, yeah, all the kinds of things that we see in different kinds—especially in popular music, less so in major league sport and less so in kind of the descendants of legitimate theater, although there's all kinds of theatrical performances with different conventions. But certainly, in popular music, it does serve as this sort of social relief valve where people can act in ways that they might perceive as crazy. So, we hear this discourse among concert fans. “I went to the show last night. It was nuts. We were down in the pit. It was crazy,” but it's still contained within this space.

There's still security acting usually as a buffer between the crowd and the stage and the performers. That performance space up there is a highly controlled environment. It's lit. Its sound is controlled. Its stage design is controlled. The behaviors of the performers is often highly rehearsed from night to night. It might be identical. As crazy as it looked to us on Thursday—

Mary Alice Yeskey

(laughter) We might be crazy tomorrow in Ohio.

Scott Kushner

I mean, performers famously tell the same joke in between songs from stop to stop on the tour. There's the old Simpsons episode, where I forget who they were lampooning, but some classic rock band was giving a concert in Springfield and the guitar player peeks at the back of the guitar at the end of the encore to see what the name of the city was. And he was like, “Thank you, Springton!”

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, they did that in *Spinal Tap* too. They say the wrong name and everybody just goes silent.

Scott Kushner

In a sense, it's like the creation of the perception of disorder and rowdiness in an environment that's actually highly controlled and highly managed, stage managed and audience managed. So, yeah, I mean, it's the question that you're asking, when did we start to applaud or how did we applaud or respond differently in earlier moments is really wrapped up in this larger set of questions about what does it mean to be a member of an audience, why are we going?

Mary Alice Yeskey

So interesting. And also, again, I keep going off on tangents, but I'm thinking about different musical genres. You know what I mean? And I've gone to see performances where it's just deadly silent and a performer at a piano and everyone's basically holding their breath. And I've gone to performances where it's exactly how you describe, there's a pit, it's screaming. It's like people singing along at the top of their lungs with their arms around each other. It's like the dynamic of that. And I'm so struck because it never occurred to me really the difference is what we as an audience are doing with each other. It's not what kind of music is being played. It's more like, are we mesmerized and staring and holding our breath and not moving?

Or are we really looking around at who else is in the audience with us as an audience? I don't know. I just, again, I'm really so struck because it always occurred to me, well, this is the kind of show where we sit and we are quiet and we listen to her at her piano versus like, I'm running up front and elbowing everyone who gets in my way. I just, it's about the audience. It's not about the music.

Scott Kushner

Well, yes. I mean, yes, I think it's very much so. And I would say that the notion of genre in music is a sorting mechanism itself that segregates audiences. And so, I was kind of making the argument earlier that the venue is a media technology that channels audiences to promoters and to operators and producers. And genre is also a mechanism that does this. It separates the goth kids from the metalheads, from the hippies, from the classical music people. And each of these different genres is also associated with different logics of comportments, different notions of how you behave.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And shared values.

Scott Kushner

Yeah. And so, for example, what we understand today to be classical music is associated with a really different kind of set of behaviors from popular music. You have to sit still and be quiet. You clap not every time the music stops.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right. God forbid. In between the movements.

Scott Kushner

Right. There's a specific moment when applause is permitted.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And you're waiting for them to show you, you know what I mean? You wait for the performer to put his bow down and then, you know, it's over because there's been all this, but it's very nerve-wracking. You don't know yet. Unless you know the piece by heart.

Scott Kushner

The errant clap becomes a marker of social distinction, right? Oh, they don't know. They're not properly cultured. They clapped at the wrong time. So, I mean, there was the book *Highbrow Lowbrow* which is I think from the eighties, maybe the nineties, is a book that's largely about the work that different kinds of culture and sort of gradations of cultural production do to sort out populations off of a class. And you know, this is very clear.

One thing that I found fascinating is the rise of classic rock and kind of the path that classic rock has taken as its audience has gotten older and older, the format as a radio station format emerges in the nineties, maybe the eighties, but I think the nineties is really when classic rock becomes a format on FM radio. And those artists—the big obvious one that's still going is it's like the Rolling Stones—

Mary Alice Yeskey

Aerosmith, yeah.

Scott Kushner

—they're still playing year after year, summer after summer, they're still getting out of the—or Bruce Springsteen is, he's going out on tour, I think this year or next year or something like that. You know, and he's got to be in his seventies, I would think, and his crowd is certainly that old for the most part. And if you go to one of these shows—I've been to a few of them. I actually went with my parents about right around the time that I shifted from French to media studies. Bruce—not Bruce—the Stones came to Duke, they played at Wallace Wade Stadium.

But you know, so that was, I mean, that's already 15 years ago, but my parents happened to be visiting. So, I like, you know, got us tickets and we went. They'd never seen the Stones before, I'd never seen the Stones before. They were great. You know, it's like theater. They're amazing and all that. But it's very much like the crowd is seated, and they're attentive, and they're waiting. And I have to imagine today when the Stones play it's even more so because their crowd is—

Mary Alice Yeskey

Even older.

Scott Kushner

Even older for them, you know, they're not making a lot of new Rolling Stones fans. (laughter) And so, you know, I think about—I have friends who went to Genesis. They did a tour, which apparently is their last tour. Phil Collins, I guess is not doing well, was having trouble standing, can't play the drums anymore. And so, my friends who like me or, you know, we're middle-aged, we're in our forties, they went and they said they were the youngest people there. And I guess the sound was really low.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, wow. It wasn't even that loud.

Scott Kushner

Yeah. This is a—they went to the new Boston Garden, which isn't even that new anymore. And we've been to shows in arenas before and it's usually loud, but I guess the Genesis sound was, was quiet.

Mary Alice Yeskey

(laughter) It doesn't go to 11.

Scott Kushner

It doesn't, they don't turn it up to go to 11 any longer and it's in part a response to what kind of audience is it that they're playing to. And I actually, you know, I couldn't help but have the thought there's probably a higher representation of Genesis fans who use assistive hearing aids and really loud music is painful with a hearing aid.

Mary Alice Yeskey

True. As are, you know, probably a lot of the folks in the band and on this crew, you know what I mean? Like they—

Scott Kushner

Yeah. Maybe not the crew, but certainly the band. So, it's an accommodation in a sense, how high do you turn it up? How do you tune the base relative to the mid frequencies and the highs? How do you set up becomes as much an accommodation to the varying abilities of the performers and certainly the audience as, as it is a way to mesh with a certain kind of audienceing that the audience met, you know, the spectators are performing from the stand.

And one of the things I hope to do in the years to come is finagle my way into some of the industry conferences that handle the ticketing industry and the arena management industry and kind of get a sense of what it is that they're talking about and what it is that they're worried about or concerned about. I have the sense that what they're really interested in doing right now is finding ways to fine-tune the various dimensions of their offerings in order to meet the needs of their different audiences for different kinds of events, that they stage in their buildings. So, food service levels.

Mary Alice Yeskey

What time the show starts is another one.

Scott Kushner

Yeah. I mean, those kinds of things have long been done, you know, like kids show start at three or whatever. The Globetrotters do two shows a day.

Mary Alice Yeskey

It's true. Yeah. But I mean, yeah, even now it's like, I see a show that starts at seven or six and I'm like, "Yes!" I'm in that dynamic. I'm in that branch right now. I'm just like, I will get home

and be in bed before 11. That's fantastic. Yeah. So interesting. I could talk about this for hours, but I want to respect your time, but I do want to ask you, you did make mention of a book, so I wanted to ask what's next for you research-wise and what's kind of coming down the pipe for you so that we can be on the lookout for it.

Scott Kushner

Yeah. So, my main project is this book project, which is called *Enclosing Performance*. And it tells the sort of media theoretical story of the event venue of the stadium, the arena, the theater, the music hall, as a technology that does all the stuff we've been talking about today that shapes content and channels it to audiences and shapes audiences and delivers them to promoters and producers. So, it's one part media theory, one part history of technology, one part science technology studies, and even a little bit of performance studies mixed in there, trying to make sense of what are the conditions under which cultural performance is staged, especially as it interfaces with capital.

So, that's my main project. I'm working on that book right now. My other main projects—the one that I kind of put on the back burner when I started this one is called *The Lurking Problem*. And it's a new media studies project that is to do with the practices of not generating content when the generation of content is expected. So, this is what we're doing most of the time when we're online where, despite all the discourse of how social media democratizes everything and everyone's a participant all the time, most of us aren't, at least most of the time. And so that project is looking at how that logic works and what it means to be a user and how lurking becomes this sort of everyday deviant act that subverts the logics of userdom.

A piece of that actually just came out last summer and was published by Johns Hopkins University Press—

Mary Alice Yeskey
(laughter) Huzzah!

Scott Kushner

—in the book called—a really cool book by—it was edited by two amazing historians of computing, Janet Abbate of Virginia Tech and Stephanie Dick of Simon Fraser University. The book is called *Abstractions and Embodiments*, and it's a collection of 20-odd essays by a range of scholars across disciplines who all touch on one dimension or another of computing history and the way it affects social structures and power structures. And so, I was really thrilled to get a chance to be part of that group. And I'm really grateful to Johns Hopkins University Press for publishing it. And then I do have a smaller kind of side project that that's about popular music and mediation. And so that one is not nearly as well formed and that might be like a third project if I have time in my career to get that far. So, we'll see.

Mary Alice Yeskey

This obviously it has been so fascinating and is just squarely in my curiosity wheelhouse. So, thank you so much for those taking so much time to talk about this. Good luck with the book

and enjoy your sabbatical. It's been such a pleasure speaking with you, Dr. Kushner, I appreciate it.

[Scott Kushner](#)

Thank you, Mary Alice. It's been a real great treat to talk to you. I appreciate your taking the time.

[Mary Alice Yeskey](#)

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