

# Debate about Texting in Theaters Divides Film Lovers

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3 minutes

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In what is becoming a semi-regular occurrence on Twitter, an argument about shushing film audiences peaked and ebbed over the course of a few days recently. The battle between bloggers, commenters and tweeters centered on cell phone etiquette in the movie theater. Ultimately, the debate evoked contemplations about film history, public space, and technological change.

The discussion began with a seemingly innocuous [blog post](#) by a venture capitalist suggesting that struggling theaters might attract a new audience by allowing texting for some films in some theaters, though the question of second-screen use at the theater arises online with some regularity. In fact, the Austin, Texas-based Alamo Drafthouse theater chain has established a veritable [genre](#) on the matter, often featuring actors asking audiences not to text or talk while in the theater. Alamo videos, like the one below, have even made [national headlines](#).

The controversies convey more than etiquette lessons,

highlighting genuine challenges facing the traditional model of film exhibition in light of [declining ticket sales](#) and increasingly sophisticated home video [exhibition systems](#). Other tactics to attract moviegoers during the downturn include offering [full food](#) and drink menus and adult-only screenings.



A prominent concern in debates about movie theaters is [the decline](#) of this one model of film going: a dark room, an image projected on a larger screen, an audience rapt with attention. Ironically, historical evidence reveals that the original mode of cinema was rather different. Silent movies, for example, were accompanied by an [array of noise](#) from working-class patrons coming and going at will, children crying, and theaters hosting music, lecturers, and narrators.

Arguments about texting in movie theaters thus tap into a sense of the cinema as sacred, but they also align with broader trends – to designate multi-media and media-free public spaces – within the film industry and beyond. For instance, Amtrak offers “quiet cars” for those who want to travel without hearing other passengers on their cell phones, and libraries that are transforming themselves into multi-media centers have designated certain floors as quiet study areas. In addition to reworking how individuals engage with media on a personal

level, handheld devices and second-screen use pose fundamental questions about the place of media within public spaces.