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# Two concepts from television audience research in times of datafication and disinformation: Looking back to look forward

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# Two concepts from television audience research in times of datafication and disinformation:

## Looking back to look forward

Jonathan Corpus Ong and Ranjana Das

## ABSTRACT

Written by two communication scholars who came of age learning about the achievements of television audience studies and began their working lives at the birth of social media, this chapter offers reflection on their intellectual inheritance and heritage. Now engaged with various research addressing the social and ethical challenges posed by processes of datafication and disinformation, they discuss how key concepts in audience studies remain of urgent relevance. Focusing on the dialectically related concepts of divergence and responsibility, this chapter emphasizes how these keywords productively direct their scholarly energy to interrogate the opaque risks and vulnerabilities in contemporary technological transformations while accounting for diverse audiences' variable literacies to exert influence, read deceptive content, and demand recognition in mediated environments.

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Ong, J.C. & Das, R. (2019). "Two concepts from television audience research in times of datafication and disinformation: Looking back to look forward". In Shimpach, S. (ed.). *Routledge Companion to Global Television*. London: Routledge.

**Introduction**

We write this chapter as communication researchers who came of age learning about the achievements of television audience studies and contemplating its continuing relevance at a point in time when social media had just arrived, and when the transformation of audiences in the age of the internet was at the heart of exciting conversations around us. But as we write this chapter, we are motivated anew to revisit and reconsider the conceptual repertories from television audience reception studies, for it is highlighted exemplarily, if shockingly, by the Cambridge Analytica controversy and the resultant Facebook hearings that, once again, "audiences are now being newly fought over as the pawns in the games of powerful others" (Livingstone, forthcoming). These fights over audiences, their data, their privacy, their safety, amongst much else, are part and parcel of a new socio-technological moment we find ourselves in – a moment scholars are varyingly approaching as times of datafication, or dataism, theorized succinctly by van Dijk as a condition where "masses of people— naively or unwittingly—trust their personal information to corporate platforms" (2014, p 197). As scholars around us are occupied with an entire spate of new challenges surrounding digital disinformation such as "fake news" (Marwick & Lewis 2017; Ong & Cabanes 2018), algorithmic injustices (Gillespie 2018; Noble 2018), and data- or techno- colonialisms (Couldry & Mejias 2018; Madianou 2018), we find similar debates replaying themselves, as we look back at television audience studies today. As Livingstone notes in her thoughtful account of datafication and mediatization –

> "it is important to remember John Hartley's (1987) critique of the concept of "the audience" as the invisible fiction invented by the industry to create docile subjects.

The flip side of this implied quantifiable and commodified audience is an implied all-powerful media industry that will never succumb to the rule of law, the norms of civil society, or the public interest. Promoting these fictions may be in the media's own interests but it does not serve those of the academy or the public" (Livingstone, forthcoming).

So, we pause today, to look back at the long and rich history of television studies in terms of its focus on audiences as socio-culturally situated subjects, and we begin to think of two key concepts, keywords if one will, which we suggest are worth retaining within our repertories, today. These might not quite by the most visible and most circulated keywords, but we suggest these hold critical value in contemporary times. We consider first – *divergence* – the seemingly simple concept but largely fraught with critiques – that arose out of television audience studies. Divergence, as we discuss below offers us a promise today in the age of big data to note with care, the value of contextual messiness. It also offers us, through its critiques – a reminder of the power of platforms, within and against which relatively powerless audiences must operate. We consider next -- *responsibility* -- which underlines how audiences not only have agency or rights but crucially also moral obligations across their diverse activities of mediated participation. Responsibility asserts that audiences are not entities wholly exploited or powerless but through an ever-expanding array of technologized actions–searching and connecting, but also trolling or doxxing–are fundamentally moral actors in a shared mediated public sphere. Of course, in considering *responsibility,* we remain conscious of the many responsibilities which platforms, with great power, bear, and to which they must be held accountable. But in this piece, we focus on *responsibility,* our second keyword, in terms of its invitation to us to engage with the question of justice, as we have to acknowledge that any discussion of moral norms, standards, and

regulation needs to confront issues of historical inequality and structural oppression across lines of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability.

We argue therefore that it is important to continue to hold onto the central tension that drives television audience studies research: on the one hand, its sensitivities to pluralism, diversity, and radical contextualization (e.g., Radway 1985), and on the other hand, its concern for norms, values, and moral economies (e.g., Silverstone 1994). We need to hold on to this tension as our field is caught in a pendulum swing back toward old assumptions of hypodermic needle media effects, as in some recent writings about how audiences are duped by fake news and filter bubbles, sharply criticized by Paula Chakravartty and Srirupa Roy (2017). Recent concepts of dataveillance (van Dijck 2014), data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias 2018), and technocolonialism (Madianou 2018) also characterize mediation as enforcing totalizing logics of domination, particularly toward vulnerable communities such as refugees who are dehumanized in the process of becoming data points. These accounts are convincing and alarming, but certainly not the last word.

The authors who write this paper came together as members of a generation of audience researchers who began their working lives at the birth of social media, who were trained to look back towards reception analysis with electronic media to make sense of analyzing new media audiences. This meant the coming together, perhaps, of the two pathways Curran once presented as oppositions in describing empirical reception studies—"a reversion to previous received wisdoms rather than a reconnaissance of the new" (Curran, 1990, p. 135). In seeking to do both, today this generation finds itself once again at another point of socio-technological transformation where the core ambitions of audience research—to do research on the side of the audience (Ang, 1996)—need restating, at the brink of the potentially transformative Internet of Things, mediating the life worlds and practices of audiences as individuals and communities, and becoming an increasingly realistic possibility.

When we use the word *transformative* here, we combine hope and skepticism alike, evading, hopefully, the hype that seems to surround us. These ambitions of doing audience research that tailors itself to transforming communicative conditions, but nonetheless also continues to do research *on the side* of the audience, must note that critical questions about media regulation, surveillance, privacy, and essentially inequalities of power, are beginning to overlap across conversations on social media and on the IoT (Dencik 2017; Deuze et al., 2012; Dourish & Bell, 2011; Mansell, 2012; Noble 2018). In recognizing generational positions in this narrative thus, far from being determined, even softly, by technology (see Stalder, 2006), one must listen carefully to Bolter and Grusin's work on remediation (1999), Livingstone's account of the mediation of everything (2008), and parallel conversations on media life (Deuze, 2009). As we read the history of the IoT (Ashton, 1999) we can see, for instance, glimpses of what went before it—for instance, ubiquitous or pervasive computing (Ark & Selker, 1999). In selecting the keywords we do, from television audience studies, we are conscious that we write this chapter at the rise of rapid developments in connected gadgets, highly individualized digital experiences, the connection of "things," and, of course, the availability of previously unprecedented amounts of data to analyze. Like all new socio-technologically transformative moments, these developments now sit at the heart of often contrasting discourses, varyingly optimistic and pessimistic, like debates from the earliest days of the internet (see Volume 1, Issue 1 of the journal *New Media & Society*, 1999).

Countering utopian narratives about the promises and potentials of technological advancements, come findings from audience researchers who remind us of what has essentially been the longstanding duality between materialism and sociality discussed within science and technology studies (cf. Woolgar, 2002). Such research states that audiences and users "might resist implied user practices, renegotiate functions of interfaces and even force media companies to change some of their restrictive settings" (Mollen & Dhaenens, 2017, p.

27). Once again, it seems necessary to re-investigate and re-iterate the societal, political, and even intellectual importance of audience agency, literacies and interpretive work in the face of emerging technological conditions, perhaps even more so than ever before, just as it remains imperative on audience analysts to engage with the study of the very architectures and affordances of these emerging material spaces (Hutchby, 2001) whose biases range from the implicit to the intentionally obscured.

For each concept below, we reflect on its value, first and foremost, in the socio-technological conditions of today, following it up with reflections on some of the critiques these concepts drew as well, for we find value in both.

**Divergence**

One of the key achievements of television audience reception studies was the lesson that audiences diverge from authorial intention in making meaning, and that audiences, socio-culturally located, diverge from each other in their meaning-making work. This impetus in television audience studies, came from both sociological and cultural studies approaches, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, where interpretative work was contextualized within relations of structure and power (see Lotz, 2000 for a review; see Ang, 1985; Bobo, 1995; Brunsdon, 1997; Press, 1991; Press and Cole, 1999; Radway, 1984, Morley, 1980). Television audience studies was marked by the rise of genre-specific, often ethnographic studies of the interpretations of film and television texts in contexts, and the valuable pursuit of pleasure, resistance, critique, play and identity (see Ang and Hermes, 1991; Allen, 1999; Bailey, 2005; Brown, 1990; Long, 1986; Morley, 1992, 1993). Radical contextualism offered by Janice Radway (1988) 20 years ago held two possibilities. One was the promise of contextual richness which is still today being interestingly adopted by many audience ethnographers, leading to thick accounts of cultural reception in everyday life (e.g.

Bird, 2003). The other, as Ang put it, in different words, was a feeling of endlessness in this journey (Ang, 1991). We suggest that these lessons around divergence, seemingly simple, is often forgotten in contemporary analyses of people's engagement with platforms, or in sweeping generalizations around big-data derived 'patterns' revealed about audience behavior and practices, and hence, a lesson worth returning to. Hear, for instance, the moral panics echoed in recent studies that overstate how social media's filter bubbles or microtargeted ads have duped voters in western democracies, for a rearticulation of the "hypodermic needle" perspective of media effects for a digital media age (for a review, see: Chakravartty and Roy, 2017).

But equally, amidst the importance of remembering the critical relevance of divergence, agency and context, we are reminded of the many critiques, the very word divergence accumulated in the heyday of television reception studies.

> The claim that audiences have the ability to create their own empowering responses to mass mediated texts loses little of its force when it is acknowledged that the polysemic freeplay of discourse has been overestimated (Condit, 1989, p. 108).

Voices from critical-cultural studies, for instance those writing in rhetorical and textual analyses traditions in general (Condit, 1989), and those within political economy studies (Dahlgren, 1998), brought the earliest of critiques, that divergence and polysemy had been over-celebrated, and over-glorified—the case for audiences' active agency having been taken too far forward, and real, lived issues of power being mis-read. Reading this critique in the context of newly emerging and intrusive

interfaces, it seems particularly instructive to pay attention to the issues shaping and sometimes even restraining audience and user agency today, with the rise of what the CEDAR network has called "intrusive media"- interfaces, for instance, the most ubiquitous social media platforms, which are designed to boost the contribution of user data and labour. As Dhaenens and Mollen (2017) note, these newer, intrusive forms of mediated communication are marked by four characteristics:

> *Exploitation* which is used as a generic term to assemble such phenomena as free labour and encompasses research that targets the economic interests of media companies; *formativity* which describes how specific conceptions, roles and types of agency become pre-configured for audiences and their engagement with media in their everyday life within the software interfaces and the algorithmic functioning of intrusive media; *pervasiveness*, which refers to the increasing ubiquity, embeddedness of and reliance on digital software-based media in people's everyday life, requiring them to display and adopt complex and differentiated ways of handling and managing their engagement with media, and last, *exclusion* which refers to the power imbalance between producers and providers of digital media platforms and their users and audiences (p 25-26).

These textual features may not only work to anticipate agency into standardized pre-configurations, but they also then feed into wider, core structural issues of power, within which user and audience agency is imbricated. So, for instance, amidst the huge participatory and creative potentials often discussed with regard to interfaces such as YouTube, what new forms of hidden labor arise (see Fuchs, 2015)? How does creative agency get co-opted? These and other questions draw attention to the

old concerns around over-celebrating agency and divergence, albeit in a different context.

> The inferences derived from reception analysis as a whole have not pointed to new directions. In some cases, they have resulted in old pluralist dishes being reheated and presented as new cuisine (Curran, 1990, p. 151).

Curran's well-known rebuttal of the claims to apparent novelty by what he called the "new revisionism" (1990) that was active audience studies contained critiques that the endless line of empirical reception projects, presenting broadly the same kinds of findings on audience agency, interpretive work, critical decodings, and resistance, in the context of their everyday lives, was occasionally repackaging older, pluralist knowledge achievements, for instance, those emerging from within gratifications research. He goes further to note that the so-called new revisionists' celebration of individual decodings had led to a case for the destruction of public service broadcasting across Europe and deregulation in general. The latter presents the case that the focus on what was then perhaps perceived, or even presented, as limitless polysemy (see also Condit's critique above, or Seaman's 1992 critique as well), led to the idea that, since decodings were endlessly diverse and versatile, cultural producers and media institutions ultimately get a pass when asked challenging questions of harm and offense (see Das & Graefer, 2017) .

Seaman (1992), in the critique of the supposed "pointless populism" of reception studies (with which many audience analysts will rightly disagree), makes a similar point that, "the problem does not lie with audiences, but rather with a system of mass communication that systematically excludes certain forms of programming and

imagery, in favor of a profoundly restrictive and highly interest-driven selection. The problem is not with audience interpreting practices, but what is available for interpretation" (1992, p. 308). So Curran's warning early on, in 1990, that the "new revisionism" had led to a perhaps unintended push towards the dislocation of responsibility from the producing and regulating institutions behind texts, is worth bearing in mind today, in the age of Web 3.0, where the social-democratic roles and responsibilities of those behind emerging technologies need to be kept firmly in focus for those behind intrusive architectures to be held accountable. This is a straightforward reminder, echoed outside of pluralist traditions, within critical-cultural scholarship in rhetoric, for instance. As Condit notes, "the audience's variability is a consequence of the fact that humans, in their inherent character as audiences, are inevitably situated in a communication system, of which they are a part, and hence have some influence within, but by which they are also influenced" (1989, p. 120). Whether the so-called new revisionism had indeed simply led to a string of projects without advancing theory is now dubitable, for in the decades that have followed the publication of the piece, scholars have repeatedly returned to tell the story of the field, to make sense of its repertoires, and a considerable amount of reflexive stock-taking has taken place. This needs to continue as the logical next step of the audience agenda as we enter yet another phase of socio-technological transformations. So, with divergence, we seek to make a two-fold argument. First – that we retain it, and not lose sight of contextual diversity and messiness, amidst the rise and rise of big data led methods. But equally, we remain mindful that we must not allow the existence of divergence become a route through which the power of platforms goes unchallenged, and where harmful content goes unregulated, simply because people diverge in their meaning-making work.

**Responsibility**

In productive tension with the concept of divergence therefore is our second keyword of responsibility. In the face of today's populist political currents, the rise of fake news, and the opaque operations of algorithmic formulae that entrench or even deepen socio-cultural divides, we should ask three questions: What normative standards, if any, do we hold audiences in evaluating the terms of their participation in a digitally mediated "space of appearance" (Silverstone, 2007)? Additionally, what is the responsibility of platform owners toward their users and subscribers--however dispersed, divided, and divergent they might be across time and space, cultural background and political affiliation? Finally, as audience researchers many of whom dedicated to the spirit of ethnographic research, how can we make sure that the "deep stories" of the people we meet aim toward building bridges and breaking down "empathy walls", to borrow the words of the feminist sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2017), so that our interventions truly work "in the best interests of audiences" (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019)?

Responsibility as a central and all-encompassing concern that implicates the variety of morally implicated agents interlinked across screens and interfaces was the late Roger Silverstone's challenging invitation in the early 2000s when he expanded the agenda of media ethics. It is worth revisiting his invocation for audience ethics:

> "If audiences are active and if the notion of activity has any meaning at all, then they must be presumed to have to take responsibility for those actions. If audiences refuse to take that responsibility, then they are morally culpable. And we are all audiences now" (Silverstone, 2002, p. 16).

Indeed, some audience researchers have directly engaged with Silverstone's invitation in recent scholarship around distant suffering and mediated humanitarianism. A group of scholars in this area of research have creatively challenged the methodological choice of textual and visual criticism of narratives and photographs of natural disasters by insisting on a project of mapping out the diverse modes of moral engagement, and conversely, denial strategies that audiences express in the face of mediated events of tragedy (see, e.g., the 2015 special issue "Audiences in the Face of Distant Suffering", edited by Stijn Joye and Johannes von Engelhardt in the *International Communication Gazette*). The aim to catalogue divergences often through thick description moves beyond "pointless populism" by keeping divergences in tension with normative criticism, acknowledging that media representations nevertheless serve as important "cultural resources" that may facilitate public actions of memorialization (Kyriakidou, 2014) or witnessing (Ong, 2014), just as social media architectures often constrain but do not preclude cosmopolitan action (Madianou. 2013; Pantti, 2015; Scott, 2014).

In light of contemporary populist formations and the controversial contributions of new digital weapons from anonymous political trolls (Bradshaw and Howard, 2017) to entrepreneurial teenage platform workers in Macedonia (Silverman and Alexander, 2017) to unholy alliances of right-wing nationalists (Marwick and Lewis, 2017), critical researchers need to address the insidious ways in which platform owners, tech designers, digital laborers, and media users deny their complicity to the current climate of information pollution and political polarization. Complicity for Silverstone is when media producers "fail to reflect on the limitations of their practice, and fail to communicate these both to their subjects and their audiences" and also when audiences "uncritically accept the media's representational claims, and insofar as their knowing acknowledgement of its limitations remains tacit" (Silverstone,

2007, p. 21). In an era where it is normalized creative practice for online influencers to blur the lines between factual and promotional content when they sell their "digital estates" (Abidin, 2017) to corporate brands, it is unsurprising how digital influencer culture becomes weaponizable in political campaigning especially as politicians aim for attention hacking and media manipulation (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). In the project of Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabanes, the concept of the "disinformation interface" underscores how the very porous and slippery boundaries that separate professionalized "paid troll" workers from the unpaid supporters and political fans whose boundless enthusiasm and zeal for political figures they admire. They found that disinformation production is not masterminded by evil villains but involves the dispersed promotional labor of ordinary people who are complicit to normalizing digital witchhunting and cyberbullying (Ong & Cabanes, 2018). The question of complicity challenges us to consider how various agents express various moral justifications in their everyday engagement with the mediated world: *it's not me, it's somebody else who is responsible. It's always the other who is villainized as the troll or the purveyor of fake news*. In the case of Cambridge Analytica, the important set of questions scholars have asked is: did these shady consultants and data analytics gurus exploit the vulnerabilities of a fragile ecosystem, or did they simply use Facebook as it was truly meant to be used?

In the case of digital disinformation, the keyword responsibility invites a social analysis of the contemporary political moment that assigns moral agency and commitment to the public world to all participants in a mediated environment ("we are all audiences now"). It is encouraging that emerging policy directives underlining the need for collaborative interventions assign responsibility to various sectors from government to journalists to big tech (e.g., Phillips, 2018; Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). It is crucial to articulate more clearly what responsibilities we assign to ordinary people, particularly in debates on media literacies, data justice, and ordinary ethics. (e.g., Dencik 2017). We should also push back on

tendencies toward "pointless populism", such as in studies that end up downplaying the social harms of fake news by citing that only a certain portion of the population actually spread them (Guess, Nyhan & Refler, 2018). We should also continue to explore with greater sensitivity the "deep stories" and calculated rationalities behind the formation of populist publics.

**Discussion**

Our two keywords, divergence and responsibility, are not the most obvious partners. At first glance they appear to sharply divide between a celebration of difference or disruption and a conservative exhortation toward universal principles. We view this not as a contradiction but as a creative tension, a dialectic, that we need to recover from some of the most insightful work in the tradition of television audience studies to engage anew today. Taken together, these concepts invite caution in the social critique we produce when engaging with recent anxieties around media manipulation and data privacy. Such a critique requires, following the keyword divergence, an acknowledgment of the multiple positionalities in the account of audience experience (but not to the extent that we allow those holding massive power in platform societies to evade attempts to hold them accountable), and following the keyword responsibility, a value judgment about the relationships of power that manifest in the mediated interaction such that we can assign diverse degrees of moral culpability to all media participants. We found thinking about these keywords in this manner productive, as researchers dealing with transmedia environments amidst datafication, looking back constantly to make sense of the present and the future. This is not because we concluded, that, somehow, television audience studies *must* be re-positioned in the age of datafication in order to continue to be meaningful, for, far from it, television itself continues to be a powerful and fascinating medium itself undergoing a plethora of transformations. We found this task useful because it helped us draw a scholarly line, a strand of intellectual

lineage, inheritance, or heritage, if one will, between datafication today, and the rise of television audience studies decades ago, for across these diversely mediated communicative conditions, some patterns still ring loud, clear and true. These keywords direct our scholarly energy to drawing out the opaque risks and vulnerabilities baked in to new technological transformations and logics of datafication and accounting for audiences' constraints and variable literacies to exert influence, reject deceptive content, and demand recognition in polyphonic media environments. While media and communications scholars have much to be anxious about both top-down insidious operations as well as unintended digital harms posed by the unholy alliances among big tech firms, populist political players, and unscrupulous digital disruptors, audience studies should double down in its mission to reject the "impasse of disappointment" (Henderson, 2013, p. 134) and recuperate the everyday as the site of diverse, messy, and generative possibilities.

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