



Redefining audience relations

Miguel Vicente, Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic, Miriam Stehling, Ana Jorge, Lidia Marôpo

Co-option was one of the first words emerging from our initial brainstorming about the future of audiences and audience research. This intuition turned into something concrete after our mapping exercise, but our semantic field incorporated other keywords relating to the relationship between the various agents involved in communication exchanges around us. Participation, collaboration, exploitation, free 2.0 labour were only some of the labels we found trying to capture the essence of these ongoing changes. Using in-depth interviews conducted during early 2017 in five European countries, our group reached a diverse group of experts, ranging from the audience measurement industry to civil society representatives advocating for audiences' rights. Their insightful collaboration fostered conclusions for understanding audience transformations and their social implications, with particular emphasis on co-option.

The consultations resulted in three key findings:

- Technological advances are key to – but not the only explanation for – changing relations between audiences and industries.
- Business models are reconsidered building on metrification and co-option.
- Audiences and industries are tied in complex dialectics, signalling the continued need for critical perspectives.

The transition from a classical media-centred system of distant relations between those producing messages and a vast majority of people receiving them, to a more balanced distribution of agency is fostered by technological advances, but it cannot be explained only in these terms. Social and economic norms are being redefined and the final outlook of this shift is yet to be determined, as established and emerging powers experience a constant and hard-to-predict negotiation of their influences.

The radical centrality that ICT acquired in most people's daily life demands both empirically-grounded research and theoretically-courageous attempts to explain our contemporary societies. The links between content users and producers have been multiplied and diversified, leading to a complex landscape of crossed-interests and mutual influences. Our interviewees share this uncertainty and do their best to understand and adapt their actions to a somehow confusing environment.



Changing business models

On the one hand, the business model of mass media which was dominant during the 20th century is slowly receding, although it is still up and running in all media systems across the globe. Large corporations keep on playing a key role, with a growing presence of technological players, such as Google, Apple, Facebook or Amazon (GAFA). On the other hand, mediated practices have exploded at the interpersonal and group levels of communication. Individuals are now able to produce and distribute content due to the spread of ICT skills and platforms: the extent to which these messages are reaching wide audiences is still under discussion, but it is obvious that the amount of available information experienced a constant growth which seems to be far from any slowdown. Lay people are now able to produce content, stepping outside a passive understanding of audienc(ing). Relevant concerns regarding online safety, privacy and fraudulent uses of online information appeared frequently in our respondents' quotes, as the relation between individuals and larger powers is not a balanced one. People's digital competence is not at the same level for all audiences and this leads to potential conflicts in the way people use and relate to media and technology.

Media companies and digital platforms are developing a new business model based on metrification. Technological evolution allows a precise tracking of audience practices, converting audience agency into computable data. In an era where big data is turning into an expanding reality, metrification is presented as a new step forward for market-driven audience research. People meters symbolised an epoch where TV ratings were set as the accepted system to distribute revenues among strong players.

Changing dialectics

This implies, that the politics of empirical audience research continue to matter,⁶⁴ and companies are tied into a complex dialectical relationship with audiences. Media industries are encouraging and appropriating audiences' productive engagement for their economic purposes: calls for participation are frequent, as a new resource to monetize the linkage between production and consumption. Some younger audiences are attracting online interest challenging global media players with alternative practices and resources. From bloggers to YouTubers, these people are proving that there are other alternative models to be explored. Yet, even their discourse seems to, most of the time, reflect dominant approaches to media economy: maximizing audience figures and exchanging these figures by revenue.



Critical perspectives in social sciences underline the imbalance of this relationship, highlighting that the creative participation of audiences is being co-opted by global players. However, an emerging ambiguous relationship between these platforms and audiences was identified in our work with stakeholders, constituted by conflictive interests of entities such as traditional media producers and distributors, which strive to maximize profits and audiences that seem to struggle to keep their creative work and agency protected.