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**James G. Webster:**  
*The marketplace of attention.*  
*How audiences take shape in a digital age.*  
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2014

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The popular breakthrough of the internet and the wide availability of broadband access have changed the ways in which people use and access the media. The reality facing media companies has also changed, since digital technology has allowed new forms of distribution and production to emerge and supplement those of traditional broadcast media. Taken together, these changes have led to a situation where media users can access a vast supply of content via a wide array of platforms. Since the supply of media content is growing exponentially, the complexity of identifying the 'right' content (that which suits a given user's preferences) and offering it to the user has also grown. In addition, the tools of media measurements used to track the behaviour of media users (e.g. television ratings and web measurement) have so far failed to keep up with the increasing complexity of media use and circulation. This is making it more difficult for media producers to tailor media output to match user preferences.

Webster's book describes the difficulties involved in mapping the sprawling relationships between media and their audiences, and explains why these difficulties are not only relevant to university researchers interested in media metrics and marketing professionals seeking to capitalize on the attention flows of users: they also mean that we are unable to adequately explain how the new media landscape affects the role of media in society. Many observers of the new and complex media landscape suggest that it leads to fragmentation and thus challenges the historic role of media to provide a shared horizon of news and experiences that cuts across social and cultural barriers in society; one example is Eli

Pariser (2011), who claims that the learning algorithms of Facebook and the like will eventually lead to the development of filter bubbles in which users are offered only content which is in line with the preferences they have already established.

Webster uses the metaphor of the marketplace to discuss how the audiences of today are being shaped, and to describe the forces that influence the ways in which media users divide their attention between the many offers of media content.

The book begins with an account of the main ways in which digitalization has impacted the way in which people use media (chapter two), the way in which media are produced (chapter three), and the way in which media use is tracked (chapter four). Webster notes how access to content has become easier with new online technologies, but he also stresses how traditional media (such as broadcast television) remain central elements in many peoples' media use. He also describes the major new technologies that are employed to help guide user attention in specific directions (such as the recommender systems of Amazon and Netflix), and the caveats associated with the measuring of media use that takes place across different platforms.

The three chapters all serve as excellent introductions to the current state of affairs in each of the three domains. The text is more than an easy-to-follow introduction to these broad themes, however. The book also contains an informed critique of widely discussed contemporary ideas regarding the possible effects on society of the reconfiguration of the marketplace of attention. One example of this is the above-mentioned fear of fragmentation of the public sphere into echo chambers or filter bubbles. Webster disentangles the logic of several of these widely cited claims and proceeds to demonstrate how well they correspond to the empirical evidence from contemporary research. As regards the filter bubble hypothesis, Webster shows that there are strong empirical reasons to doubt this. Most people are in fact exposed to a broad range of media and opinions during their normal cycle of media use. In this and other examples, Webster draws on a range of exemplary, scholarly publications that have succeeded in overcoming (some of) the empirical obstacles to the analysis of the multi-platform media landscape.

In two central chapters in the book (five and six) Webster develops his own model of the dynamic interplay between the formation of audience preferences and the various strategies that media organizations employ to harness their knowledge of those preferences. The model is based on structuration theory (Giddens), and the development of the model integrates many of the insights offered in the first three chapters, such as the importance of socio-cultural characteristics in shaping audience preferences and media use. In the final chapter (seven), Webster argues against ideas of fragmentation, and introduces a more nuanced approach. He argues that in current media culture, the media consumption by different audience segments differ according to the total range of media used, but also shows substantial overlap. Even if it is true that different segments use different ranges of niche media, almost everybody also makes substantial use of mainstream media outlets.

Webster draws on a broad range of theories from sociology, psychology, communication studies and economics in his discussion of the complex dynamics of the marketplace of attention. However, as indicated above, the book offers more than descriptions of different theories: the reader is invited into a lively debate on ways in which the different perspectives may help shed light on the complex reality of the media landscape of the internet era.

Reading the book in full will serve as an excellent and up-to-date introduction to both the theoretical concept of audience formation and to the major tools and metrics applied in commercial and academic audience analysis: It will also provide an insight into the role these metrics play in the media companies' shaping of the media that we encounter every day. In addition to this, scholars with an interest in mapping the patterns of media consumption will find a cogent and nuanced discussion of some of the knotty issues confronting the field today. They may also obtain a few good ideas about how to find a way out of the maze.

## References

Pariser, E. *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*, New York: Penguin Press. 2011

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