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Users across media

An Introduction

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It is an empirical fact that audiences, or users, as we prefer, are inherently cross-media (Schrøder, 2011). Media users combine, juggle and move almost seamlessly between various media platforms and services to pursue information and entertainment, carry out professional responsibilities, communicate about and act on demands in their everyday lives, and not least to interact with each other. Mobile media, such as smartphones and tablets with ubiquitous Internet access, epitomize this development by converging various media on a single multipurpose platform. A key observation in the current, digital media landscape is that media use, from television to telephones, is increasingly personalized, fragmented and connective (Holt et al., 2016). Traditional conceptions of media users – understood as the individuals or collectives (audiences, publics, spectators, etc.) at the receiving end of mediated communications – are put under pressure by the convergence of mass and interpersonal media

on digital platforms and services. Users are increasingly seen as productive and participatory; they curate, share, comment and create digital media content for diverse purposes and in diverse contexts. Studying cross-media from the point of view of users and the roles they undertake when engaging with media, we contend, involves a decentring of media and a centring of the analysis on communicative practices as crystallized in patterns of cross-media use.

Various notions of cross-media have emerged in audience and user studies to the enrichment of our theoretical, as well as empirical, understanding of the contemporary media user. As some of these efforts are beginning to consolidate, taking stock of the user's perspective on the study of cross-media practices appears to be timely. Together, the seven articles compiled in this special issue do exactly this. Thus, we hope this Convergence special issue on 'Users across media' will form an important baseline for the future development of conceptual lenses and empirical approaches to studying users across, rather than within, media.

The seven contributions in this special issue bring forth a number of original and interrelated perspectives for the study of cross-media use at macro, meso and micro levels and present a mix of theoretically and empirically driven scholarship.

The first three articles in this special issue are mainly conceptual: In the first article, James Webster addresses the macroscopic dynamics that shape user preferences and discounts prevalent myths about the uses of digital media. Uwe Hasebrink and Andreas Hepp in their article propose a model for interlacing the perspectives of individual cross-media use (media

repertoire) and collective cross-media use (social domain), which existing research typically treats as separate theoretical and empirical entities. In the third article, Ike Picone argues for 'media user' and 'media use' as adequate and analytically advantageous concepts to address the various ways in which people float across media.

The next four contributions are empirically based analyses of cross-media preferences and practices. Jan Fredrik Hovden and Hallvard Moe study the way in which different groups of citizens establish and maintain 'public connection' via patterns of cross-media use. In his article, Kenzie Burchell unpacks media users' management of the communicative environment in their everyday lives. David Mathieu and Tereza Pavlickova examine the interpretative processes involved in cross-media usage on the meta-medium Facebook. Finally, Klaus Bruhn Jensen studies the way users relate to and seek information, communicate and take action (or not) on climate change across interpersonal, mass and networked forms of communication.

In this introduction, we present the central premises on which this special issue builds. We first provide an overview of the way in which audience and user studies have engaged with cross-media to single out how the contributions in this special issue further develop conceptualizations of 'users' and 'cross-media'. In the following sections, we focus on three overriding and interrelated questions, to which the articles in this special issue offer different approaches and insights. The first question concerns the concept of the user and the ways in which the user attains and exercises power in cross-media use patterns. The second question addresses the media preferences of users, including the mechanisms that shape such

preferences. The third question deals with prevalent cross-media patterns of use at the level of communicative practices. We conclude by reflecting on further implications of the current cross-media use for research.

Users and communicative practices in context

Back in the predigital age, people watched television, listened to the radio and read the newspaper. They were viewers, listeners and readers, as defined in relation to the medium of choice as well as the sensory and cognitive functions employed. With smartphones, tablets and laptops tethered to the Internet one may watch, listen, read and interact from a single device. People 'doing' something with media are no longer necessarily defined by the specific form of media, but rather by the social role they perform doing so, be it as citizens, consumers, workers, private individuals and so on. Similarly, collectives of users are not simply addressed as 'readers', 'listeners' or 'spectators'. At least in media and communication research, these notions have been overtaken by concepts such as 'publics' (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015) and 'networks' (e.g. Castells, 2009). User roles may, in turn, blur boundaries between lay persons and experts, amateurs and professionals, in so far as users take part in media production for digital platforms and service. These roles are enacted through users' communicative practices in specific contexts, which form the natural starting point for analysing contemporary cross-media use.

Studying cross-media use in terms of 'communicative practices' offers the analytical advantage

that it is possible to bridge and encompass the relationships between media, which are established by individual and collective users in purposeful or coincidental combinations, and sometimes influenced by the algorithmic infrastructures of digital media. Broadly speaking, the commitment to communicative practices rather than singular media platforms undergirds the conceptualizations and analyses of cross-media use included in this special issue. Before we turn to the specific contributions of the articles, we would like to highlight how this special issue draws on existing research within audience and user studies.

To study cross-media use and users poses challenges for media scholars. Traditional divides between text and audience as well as between media production and media consumption have become less distinct. Moreover, the distinction between 'old' and 'new' media becomes increasingly difficult to maintain as we, for example, watch flow television and read the newspaper on mobile media. Abandoning the classic notion of media as the pivotal point, concepts such as flows, everyday conductance and communicative practices instead become points of departure for understanding the ways in which users organize and sift through multiple media – and make meaning of and in this process. Along with this shift of focus from media to communicative practices, studying cross-media use and users is also challenged by the fact that the concept of cross-media has primarily been associated with the production of media content for multiple platforms, as seen for instance in studies of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006; Klastrup and Tosca, 2016; Scolari, 2009). A related line of work deals with convergence in the media industries, including how media organizations consolidate and

develop their business models by expanding the portfolio of offerings for their target audiences (cf. Aarseth, 2006; Bechmann, 2012; Ibrus and Scolari, 2012). This literature has much to offer in terms of the professionally orchestrated use of diverse media to push certain ideas, content and commodities to audiences whether they be understood as eyeballs, fans or publics. Yet, due to its analytic focus on specific textual universes or production processes, it goes beyond the scope of this research to study concerted media use as seen from the perspective of individual users or users as such and their practical and purposeful combination of media in pursuit of specific experiences, information and so on.

Over the past few years, scholarly focus on cross-media production and texts has been supplemented with an increased focus on cross-media users. We have witnessed, not least through the Meaning Across Media project hosted at the University of Copenhagen in 2012–2015, which spurred the idea for this special issue, that approaches within the field of audience and user studies have sought to conceptualize and empirically map cross-media patterns from the users' point of view. A very influential line of research in this respect deals with media repertoires (Hasebrink and Domeyer, 2012; Hasebrink and Popp, 2006). The notion of media repertoires refers to the personally meaningful pattern of media use that comes together when individuals select and combine items from the media menu. Media repertoire research is empirically grounded, typically survey based, and its main contribution lies in developing typologies of media users, based on characteristic media preferences (see e.g. Helles et al., 2015). Such overarching types may form the basis of qualitative empirical work that examines

how media are combined, for which communicative practices and with what purposes. Even so, the mapping of typical combinations or preferences of media still constitutes the core contribution of media repertoire research to understanding cross- media use.

Others have entered the study of cross-media use from a broader perspective of news consumption and everyday life in general. For instance, Schrøder and Larsen (2010) study audiences' sense-making of news across media in terms of the perceived worthwhileness of various media. In their edited volume on news across media, Jensen et al. (2016) argue that news production and news consumption can no longer be studied as isolated entities, but must rather be seen as a continuum. Vittadini et al. (2010) take a practice-based approach and 'virtually shadow' participants across situations in everyday life to elicit data on users' cross-media cultures (for further reflections on everyday life as a lens for studying cross-media use, see Sandvik et al., 2016). Such everyday life centrism has also led to calls for methodological developments to better grasp cross- media communication flows and networks first hand (see e.g. Kobbernagel and Schrøder, 2016; Thorhauge and Lomborg, 2016).

Using extant research as a steppingstone, the articles in this special issue further the conceptual charting of users and communicative practices across media. First of all, the crucial issue of how scholars might define what is oftentimes referred to as 'the people formerly known as the audience' is approached. Whereas a critical stance towards the old notion of 'the audience' is mainstream in audience and user studies in general, research on cross-media use is perhaps most vocal in detailing the many kinds of communicative engagement with media from

interpersonal encounters to broadcast and networked media practices. We share this scepticism about the audience. Media use is deeply embedded in the practices and situations making up the social fabric of personal everyday life, and, furthermore, media intersect with other factors, including the structural layout and constraints of work and family life as well as the habits we accumulate as individuals over time. The notion of the user is preferred here because it better highlights the agency of individuals and collectives in the practical selection, management and organization of and with media as part of their making meaning of everyday life.

As already mentioned, this special issue moves from macro-level theory through meso- and micro-level conceptual work to gradually more fine-grained empirical analyses of contemporary cross-media use. However, a number of themes run across the special issue and link the contributions to each other in ways that synthesize and suggest particularly salient discussions and analytical dimensions for the future study of cross-media use. We discuss the three most important overriding questions in the following sections.

Conceptualizing the (empowered) user

The first question concerns the conceptual engagement with users: How and to what extent are they empowered by the current cross-media supply of communicative options? Several of the articles in the special issue rely on conceptually qualified notions of the user. Most explicit in this regard is Picone whose article makes a general theoretical case for the concept of the media user against the backdrop of conceptual discussions of various other classic and newer notions,

including 'audiences' and neologisms such as 'produsers' (Bruns, 2008) and 'prosumers' (Toffler, 1980). For Picone (2017, this issue), the concept of media user is freed from presumptions about the specific and shifting roles that we may each take upon us when engaging in communication whether in receptive, interactive or productive modes: who the media user becomes (and not who he or she essentially is) must be empirically qualified in specific contexts. For cross-media use studies, the advantage of media user lies exactly in this flexibility. This concept does not privilege any medium or role over others, and therefore is fit for the study of in situ flows across devices, services, genres and so on. Picone's theoretically underpinned notion of the media user, pragmatic as it may seem, offers a very useful response to those who have be hesitant to replace audiences with users with reference to the latter being undertheorized. Jensen operates with a similarly pragmatic conceptual qualification of the media user. Taking on this heritage from reception studies, he regards media users as active, meaning-making agents. This becomes the entryway for exploring users' practical activities of soliciting and obtaining information on climate change as well as their communications and actions on this information across interpersonal, mass and networked media. Jensen reminds us that, at the bottom line, media users are 'biologically, biographically, and socially situated individuals'.

Depending on the context of study, user roles may be further developed – conceptually and analytically – as seen, for instance, in the contribution by Mathieu and Pavlickova. They update and redefine Iser's (1978) historically well-tested concept of the reader, originally from literary

studies, to explore how users select, filter, scan and interpret the diverse sourced content and communications in their personalized Facebook newsfeeds. The reader's 'work' upon media and texts is then identified as the analytical focus in accounting for cross-media practices and meanings in context.

One notable undercurrent to conceptual discussions of media users and their roles has to do with empowerment. This issue is addressed both in terms of the greater freedom of choice of information and communication sources and in terms of taking action in political processes, civil society and in their personal lives. Some years ago, the split was often made between technological utopians and technological dystopians, which, respectively, put much or little faith in the ability of digital communication technologies to contest or change existing power structures. The articles in this special issue address the role and power of users by offering more nuanced, middle range approaches. James Webster's article singles out three prevailing 'myths' about current media users, the first one being that 'users are now in charge' (Webster). This myth, to remain in Webster's vocabulary, explicitly wrestles with the question of user agency in digital media. Whereas users certainly enjoy extended freedom to choose, create and share content digitally, as Webster argues, they do not automatically know their options and thus cannot be expected to act rationally. Furthermore, the media themselves push back and constrain the choices of users, but often in ways that are opaque and invisible to us. In alignment with Webster's account of user agency, Picone (2017, this issue) argues that users' activity should not be conflated with their power to act. When it comes to exerting power

through participation in, for instance, the public sphere, empowerment is conditioned by user activity, and also by other factors such as media literacy, including the users' ability to sort and critically engage with digital media and content. Accordingly, empowerment also depends on who the users are – that is, their economic, social and cultural background as well as basic demographic factors. Contributions to this special issue study various groups of users, defined by their occupation (e.g. students), religion, class, age and so on. Jan Hovden and Moe explicitly address this topic in their article. They argue that the increasingly fragmented and personalized use of media constitutes a 'key challenge for modern democracies' (Hovden and Moe, 2017: this issue). Hence, patterns of media use should be seen in connection with what they designate 'sociocultural differences', such as lifestyle and social class. Hovden and Moe study the question of how and to what degree citizens take part in public connection within the, relatively speaking, small and homogenous Norwegian population. The spectra of sociocultural differences, and by extension empowerment, may of course be wider or narrower depending upon the national/regional settings as well as forms of government, political regulation of communication, availability of communicative infrastructure and devices and so on.

Based on the empirical contributions in this special issue, it seems fair to suggest that empowerment is context dependent. In Jensen's analysis of communication about climate change

across media, users' ability and willingness to act on the information they receive about risks associated with climate change is, at best, uncertain. Climate change appears, as Jensen (2017, this issue) writes, 'out of scale', that is, abstract and incomparable to other issues on the public agenda. Burchell, in his piece on 'ordinary' people's daily management of 'the media manifold' (Couldry, 2012), analytically discerns users' practices of what he labels 'relational ordering' of the various media used for interpersonal communication. A key insight to be taken from these two empirical contributions seems to be that users may not feel empowered when it comes to their options for acting on complex issues that require collective and global action. But in organizing and micro- managing their own daily business and personal relationships through media, users appear to be and feel in charge.

Media preferences

The second pertinent question running through the special issue concerns the shaping and structuring mechanism behind our media preferences. Do media preferences stem from predictable adherence to the habits and habitus of our national belonging, class, gender, age and so on? Or are they in fact, as Sonja Livingstone contends, 'messy, unpredictable, hard to locate' (Livingstone, 2014: 441)? How 'personal' are personalized media practices? The articles in this special issue take different routes to examine such questions.

Webster addresses the question of preferences by debunking myths concerning the alleged neutrality of big data. Moreover, he engages critically with the belief that we come to inhabit

'echo chambers', 'filter bubbles' and prefer to live in 'enclaves'. Such metaphors allude to the idea that our media use reflects and confirms our particular view of the world as a result of algorithmic filtering and personalization that serves us content and products that we are predisposed to like. Since the empirical evidence of such enclaves is mixed, Webster proposes a different and more nuanced structurational model for explaining media preferences in terms of what he labels 'the marketplace of attention'. The model outlines the intricate interactions between users, media and metrics in the formation of preferences. Hovden and Moe in their contribution similarly make the case that media preferences must be understood within wider contexts. In their study, they look for 'systematic connections between public orientation, media use and cultural lifestyles, and between public interest and social resources' (Hovden and Moe). Whereas Webster's model expounds on how user agency is moderated by media exposure and the digital 'information regimes' (recommender systems, etc.) that push specific content to users based on detailed profiling, Hovden and Moe emphasize and elaborate on the sociocultural factors that form agency, including preferences, in the first place.

In their conceptual contribution, Hasebrink and Hepp develop a middle ground framework for studying cross-media communication preferences as socially negotiated in context. This middle ground, conceptualized in terms of 'communicative figurations', mediates between individual media repertoires and domain-specific media ensembles. As individuals move through various contexts with specific communicative figurations in everyday life, their media repertoires, and thus their preferences, take shape.

Cross-media patterns of use

The third and final question running through the articles in this special issue pertains to cross-media patterns of use. The contributions reflect on and provide analytical examples of how practices of cross-media use might be conceptualized and approached. Hasebrink and Hepp in their article emphasize that 'cross-media research is not just about the variety of media: it is about investigating their interrelatedness'. That is to say, a full analysis of cross-media use must go beyond mapping the preferences for particular (combinations of) media to specify how and for what purposes some media are combined. Once again, communicative practices serve as the key entry point for such analyses.

Practices of cross-media use are mainly addressed in the empirical contributions to the special issue. In their studies of specific cross-media practices, Jensen as well as Hovden and Moe take their point of departure in specific domains, respectively climate change, and the more generalized domain of public interest (politics, culture, etc.). Burchell and Mathieu and Pavlickova are less issue specific. They explore instead practices of cross-media from the point of view of the individual user as situated in an everyday life context. This individual-centred approach is perhaps most clearly manifested in Burchell's article on how communicative practices associated with information seeking, interaction and entertainment intersect with one another and cut across media in everyday life. He observes that '[c]onstant networked connection and multiple integrated platforms that are converged onto mobile and networked devices, constitute the space within which a user's reflexive management and ordering of

communication practices emerges' (Burchell). Following from this is a detailed account of individuals' communicative practices of organizing and orchestrating their media environments and the ways in which their social relations play out across media. A similar focus on individual practices of sorting, filtering, interpreting and communicating is found in Mathieu and Pavlickova's analysis of users' reading of their Facebook newsfeed. Interestingly, they deal with what might be dubbed 'reverse cross-media', looking at cross-media communication on one specific platform, which integrates media content from all over the Internet. Their contribution opens up a different – and actually more media-centric – scope for researching cross-media, by taking multipurpose platforms, or meta-media, as the baseline for studying communicative practices.

Conclusion

Cross-media use is not only a question of the availability of information and communication sources for the media user. It also concerns the users' orchestration of the media menu to select, consume, share and take action on information and communication. In our introduction to this special issue of Convergence on 'Users across media', we have discussed three fundamental questions regarding contemporary media users and their cross-media communications. These three questions suggest interrelated pathways to studying cross-media use and users: through explorations of user agency, preference formation and communicative practice in diverse empirical contexts. The contributions bring a range of theoretical approaches, analytical concepts and empirical contexts into play to provide new insights and

raise new issues for scholarship on cross- media use. Obviously, these three questions would surface with different intensity in different empirical settings. To name but a few prominent examples, studying cross-media from the perspective of users in non-Western settings, an important and somewhat neglected area of research, might lead to different answers and to different ways of framing the three overall questions. Moreover, comparisons of media use across genders and generations, again as seen from the perspective of users, would be a welcome contribution to further understanding cross-media. What we hope to emphasize with the seven rich and thought-provoking articles in this special issue is the continued need for scholarly conversation that centres on users moving across media skillfully, meaningfully and constantly.

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