Editors' Introduction: Approaching the online audience: new practices, new thinking

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Convergence culture, participatory culture, user generated content, interactive media; these are all now familiar terms within contemporary media and communication studies that have risen to distinguish emergent content across digital platforms and particularly internet-based material (whether that is the worldwide web accessed through desktop/laptop machines or increasingly, internet content accessed through mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets).

Online media present a challenge to audience researchers, both within academia and communication industries as the opportunity for face-to-face encounters is dispersed across a range of configurations of technologies and differing time and space locations. Individual and group configurations of audience, and the production of meanings that they generate, become elusive objects of study as they are overwritten by the materiality of the data trails their online activities produce. Indeed the concept of audience itself, with its connotations of receptivity, is losing stability as many audience-members take up the opportunity to insert themselves into the production environment by variously direct means of content-generation. For academic researchers, including most of those in this collection, the task of re-describing, re-defining and re-locating the object of study in audience research is currently a significant part of the research endeavour, not merely a formal prelude to engagement with more substantive questions.

The advertising industry is responding to the problem of the elusive audience with investment into increasingly sophisticated technologies of dataveillance that attempt to track activity across this new media ecology, looking in particular to either monitor cross-platform forms of engagement (e.g. Nielsen's 3 screen approach: http://www.agbnielsen.net/products/a2m2.asp) or to quantify attributes of specific instances of users engaging with online media content. In the latter case this focuses especially on measures to track how users watch online video, including their access technology (their browser and operating system) through to how far through a video the user actually watches. This new environment has in effect prompted a paradigm change in advertising and related industries that are looking to direct energies toward more personalised relationships founded upon a wealth of new data that in most cases are being provided by users themselves (whether intentionally or not).

This stands in contrast to the tools used within online audience research, where 'tools' here refers to both theoretical concepts and the specific techniques of data gathering and analysis which are employed. Many of our tools are still steeped in paradigms derived from studies of the mass media (radio, print, film and television) which dominated much of the twentieth century. They are applied, with varying degrees of success, to the complex mixture of conventional and interactive content which is proliferating online.

This special issue is an outcome of a symposium organized by the Audience Research Unit at Waikato University in June 2010. Titled 'Viewers, Navigators and Users: Researching contemporary audiences', its objective was to prompt a sharing of insights from audience researchers engaging with contemporary media in the Australasian context, and to further discussion on the nature and complexities of audience engagement with online media in particular. This issue is intended to provide a range of discussions on possibilities within this new realm.

Bevin Yeatman provides a speculative paper looking to provide fresh impetus to theoretical debates over the nature of online material by returning to the foundational paradigms of audience research itself. He proposes the notion of an 'audience event', a concept inspired

by the assemblage theory of Delueze and Latour, among others. Here an audience event is an assemblage of technological, physical and psychological possibilities, shaped by dimensions of affect and intensity that coalesces into a unique, transitory instance of engagement. This premise shares a clear trajectory with earlier traditions of qualitative research, although Yeatman's insistence on the uniqueness of specific instances of 'audience events' offers a provocative challenge to the apparent stability of paradigmatic concerns within both qualitative and quantitative forms of audience research.

The second paper in this collection, from Charles Davis and Carolyn Michelle, offers a complementary discussion. They argue for the potential of Q methodology as a means of encouraging more active collaboration between the still largely divided camps of qualitative and quantitative research. Q methodology is not new to social science researchers but it is an approach which Davis and Michelle insist has been unfairly neglected as a means of gathering layered, nuanced information on contextualised interpretations of media forms. Davis and Michelle use a web-based variation of the approach to access online users who have viewed a theatrically-released feature film, providing a means of engaging with the global audience associated with James Cameron's *Avatar*. Given both the relative scalability of this methodology, and the fact that the sheer scale of online culture represents a vexing challenge to both qualitative and quantitative researchers, this methodology's applicability for broader explorations of online culture is one that requires more investigation.

Ruth Zanker explores the challenges for media producers themselves in engaging with new conceptions of audience, new terrain which poses vexing questions for local producers and users in positioning themselves within more global culture streams. While Zanker's focus is on media production designed for children in New Zealand, a locality at the relative periphery of global media flows, her discussion of how localised producers operate within this broader marketplace will resonate more widely. Here producers are motivated by an increasingly nuanced sense of audience, informed by a comparatively rich volume of real-time information generated from the loosely connected online communities created by the producers themselves.

Luke Goode, Alexis McCullough, and Gelise O'Hare investigate the implications for political discourse in the new spaces created online. The focus here is on YouTube channels established by conventional (television) news producers, which offer apt lessons in the typically fraught encounters between mass media institutions and social media technologies. In the pursuit of digital audiences, the these 'top-down' mass media industries look to exploit the rich potential of 'bottom-up' user-generated content. As Goode, McCullough and O'Hare demonstrate, however, the public spaces associated with such sites as YouTube allow for a greatly expanded field of discourse, collapsing distinctions between sober and emotive language, real and fake forms of performance, and civic-minded and carnivalesque intentions. The resulting discursive spaces are playful with, and indifferent toward, the traditional forms of communication that have tended to characterise mainstream television news. As this paper discusses, media outlets that wish to explore these sites as new distribution channels need to be prepared to brave its often anarchic forms of communication, spaces that are not easily controlled or assimilated into the hegemonic political discourse of television news production.

YouTube, despite its exponential growth, is still arguably in its initial stages of development, given the relatively low percentage of users who can be said to be actively engaging as interactive 'produsers' in the sense which Axel Bruns assumes.[1] All the papers in this collection engage in some form with questions of the 'interactivity' of online media, and in the final offering these move to the forefront of discussions. Here Ann Hardy, Craig Hight and Carolyn Michelle utilize the case study of teen drama serial *Reservoir Hill*, an early New Zealand experiment in 'online interactive television drama', to explore what types of user interactivity are afforded in practice by the constrained resource environment of a publicly-funded production process. By means of online survey research they also investigate the degree to which followers of the programme are self-reflexive partners in experimenting with the remediation of familiar narrative formats, while reflecting themselves on the methodological challenges of obtaining workable data on audiences in this new environment.

In presenting this special issue we seek to engage in the broader debate that is now taking place around the formulation of a new paradigm in audience research that stems directly from the interactive audience experience of the digital media and its meeting point with the new technological possibilities for the research process that are coming on stream as the medium itself moves into a more mature phase. In sharing a selection of the work in this area that is presently underway in New Zealand, we are keen to hear from researchers around the globe who are also seeking to make theoretical, empirical and methodological advances into a new era of audience research.

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[1] Figures generated by industry researchers have consistently shown that YouTube users who actively upload their own content are rising but still very much in a minority - for example see this graph or Pew Internet's 2010 overview of online video