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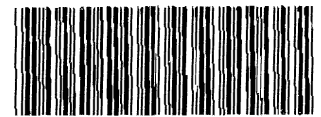


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Treating Internet users as 'audiences'

Suggesting some research directions

Lelia Green

ABSTRACT

Within the last decade the Internet 'has emerged out of nowhere' (Barr 2000, back cover) to monopolise much of the domestic time, intellectual interest, and financial resources that had previously been lavished upon film, television, and (specialist console) game consumption. So far, research on the Internet appears to be following a similar evolutionary pattern to research on broadcast media—displacement studies (what have people 'given up' to make time for the Internet?), effects studies (is it addictive, bad, bankrupting, and why?), ratings data, and response to moral panics (Internet gambling and pornography).

Arguably, applied research involving Internet participants treats users as 'audience/s'. Is this a legitimate perspective, however, when members are often content creators as well as consumers? The concept of the active audience recognises that all consumption is also production, but the production of meaning for the individual television audience member differs significantly from that which occurs when people engage in interactive exchanges on the Internet, creating content for themselves and others. This paper addresses these issues, suggesting possible research trajectories.

INTRODUCTION

This paper interrogates the notion of the Internet audience and its characteristics by examining the relevance of the domestic context, and the relationship of consumption to Internet activity. One focus of the enquiry is the notion of an Internet 'audience', given that much interaction via the Internet concentrates upon content production, as well as upon the production of meaning through the consumption of content created by other people. This dynamic creates a significant difference between the consumption of traditional broadcast mass media and the activ-

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ities of people who use the Internet. Content-creation activity is especially pronounced in relation to IRC (Internet Relay Chat) sites and online game-playing (Multi-User Dimensions—MUDs).

DOMESTIC SPACE, WORK-BASED ACCESS, AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The 'domestication' of communication and information technologies (Morley, 1986; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992) has for some time been identified as a critical component in the incorporation of these technologies into daily life. The spread of computer-based information processing and communication throughout the business and corporate world was only slightly ahead of early adoption of equivalent technology in the domestic setting. Early adopters identified two dominant roles for the new technologies in the domestic setting: education (often the parents'/purchasers' agenda) and games (the users' agenda). Further, the growth of the market for specialist games consoles (Nintendo, Sega, and Playstation) trained younger children for adolescent roles in interactive and collaborative game-playing online, and for the exploration of different personae, narratives, and plots within IRC and MUD locales.

The domestic use of the Internet allows more scope for individual self-expression through consumption and production of cultural materials than work-based access (where any production is 'professionalised', corporate, and instrumentally driven), yet both groups of users are related by a similarity of process. If the idea of the audience is jettisoned, and the idea of 'users' employed in its place, what research models are readily accessible to address issues of the ways in which the Internet is used and the meanings created by those who integrate it within their lives? The role of interactivity (and the construction of content through such interaction) combines with the dual work/home applications of the Internet to make the investigations of human action and motivation online an extremely complex issue. This has many more dimensions than the already-complex investigation of audiences in their consumption of mass media products—particularly their consumption of radio and television. 'User', however, seems a less sophisticated concept than 'audience', notwithstanding the perception that Internet users are more conceptually challenging than mass media audiences.

A further complicating factor is that some domestic acquisition of Internet technology relates to the relocation of the workplace within the context of the home. Here 'domestic usage' has implications of an elision of the categories 'work' and 'leisure'. The domestication of the technology allows, in part, the domestication of the wage-labour of the

information society, and (in a two-way exchange) the corporatisation of the home. In contrast to this, the workplace is also a site for 'illegitimate' use of the Internet—uses that are not sanctioned by the employer, and for which employees do not have permission. Such uses would normally only be legitimate within the context of domestic activities. They include accessing online pornography, gambling, and games.

The workplace, for Internet users, is also a social nexus for the exchange of information and ideas relating to further Internet possibilities: hardware, software, and online access. The entry point (drivers) that motivates the purchase of domestically based equipment and the acquisition in the workplace of relevant skills for use in the domestic context are areas of enquiry that are likely to reveal the importance of work as an instigator of Internet use in the home. In addition to axes of work/home and work/leisure, issues of gender and early/late adoption are factors impacting upon Internet users/audiences. Studies of the relationship between masculinity and machines indicate that identification with leading-edge technology is likely to impact upon users' perceptions of themselves and of each other. Wajcman claims (1991, p. 144): 'In our culture, to be in command of the very latest technology signifies being involved in directing the future and so it is a highly valued and mythologised activity'.

Informal investigations among students interested in online community (Palandri & Green, forthcoming) suggest that it may also be possible to identify characteristics of three distinct categories of Internet usage: 'light' users, 'heavy' users, and users who are not as heavy as they have been—'peaked' users. While there are financial and socioeconomic issues relating to Internet access, there are now Internet-able machines readily available on the second-hand market, and ISPs (Internet Service Providers) increasingly offer set fees for unlimited hours on a monthly or annual basis. Such packages are particularly appropriate for those who like to use the Internet for collaborative gaming and for IRC—it means that the cost of building communities is potentially fixed, rather than open-ended. While there is no doubt that 'early adopters' are among the more socially affluent social strata, some financially strapped Internet users can now get online through the diligent exploration of second-hand and public-access options.

RESEARCH ON THE INTERNET

In the past twelve months, Nielsen, the ratings organisation, has recruited 7,000 Australians to provide local quantitative consumption data to develop a logical foundation for applying concepts of cost and

value to Internet advertising. Such a commitment on the part of an international ratings organisation marks a new watershed in the desire to 'seek the Internet audience' (Ang, 1991). What is apparently lacking, however, and what has traditionally been investigated using academic paradigms (rather than commercial ones), is a detailed qualitative investigation of Internet consumption in the context of the household.

As the preceding discussion indicates, the audience for the Internet has remained undertheorised for too long, while the nature of ratings and corporate investigations into Internet usage tend to represent the Internet as unitary, or application driven. Successful audience studies/content research in the mass media domain indicates that all the genre/program streams found in film, television, and radio have their Internet equivalents. In addition to these, and in addition to the dimensions discussed above, the Internet offers further variety and complexity in providing a range of possible ways for individuals to relate to information, entertainment, and other Internet users. In the same way that audience studies research dramatically enriched academic understandings of the meanings individuals make from broadcast materials, so qualitative data has the potential to revolutionise understandings of how the Internet is used.

This is not to say that there is no research at all delivering qualitative data. Palandri and Green (in press) discuss a Bondage, Discipline, and Sado-Masochist online community, while Wilbur's (1997, p. 18) Post-modern Culture MOO is often discussed in his writings. Organisations such as The International Society for Mental Health Online (<http://www.ismho.org>), and journals such as *CyberPsychology and Behavior* address the relevance of online interaction to facilitate integration of the different aspects of individuals and their personalities. Young (who approaches Internet addiction as if it shares addictive characteristics with gambling) researched users who did, and who didn't, feel 'in control' of their Internet habits. Most users who felt their Internet habit was beyond control were logged onto chat rooms and MUDs. As one of Young's contributors commented: 'MUDs are like a religion to me, and I am a god there. I am respected by all the other MUDders. I know that I am playing against other highly intelligent people, and ... getting stronger at the game gives me a great high' (Young, 1998, p. 69). Thus, there are elements of the research picture emerging, but no overarching investigation into which these fragments can slot.

What is required is an Internet-use paradigm with the cogency and influence of Morley's *Family Television* (1986), within which to integrate Young's and others' studies. All the indications are that, when this para-

digim is developed, it will necessarily be more complex and multifaceted than any equivalent investigation into mass media broadcast audiences. The Internet is more complex, multi-dimensional, and interactive than broadcasting has ever been.

ARE THERE PROBLEMS WITH TREATING INTERNET PARTICIPANTS AS 'AUDIENCE/S'?

Can we apply conventional audience research techniques to unconventional audiences? How would such findings relate to issues of power, identity, and community that are raised theoretically, but rarely addressed in the context of the consumption and production of Internet materials?

Issues of power, identity, and community are all interpersonal issues, influenced to a large extent by self-perception. Power is entirely relational. Powerful and powerless are only meaningful concepts as part of a comparison—either with other people, or with the 'self' of a different time/stage. So, for example, a competent Internet user might find that their activities on the Internet make them feel more powerful than they felt without that expertise. The sense of power, however, is a qualitative perception undisclosed through material such as ratings data.

Identity might appear to be more closely connected to one's sense of self. Nonetheless, how others perceive our identity affects how they treat us. In part, our sense of identity is dependent upon our perceptions of the ways in which others treat us. Qualitative research will provide pointers relating to interaction online and will help researchers understand the complex ways in which the online environment can and does affect our sense of self, and our sense of identity—and how these are related to a sense of power.

A sense of community—and a sense of belonging to a community—has been an issue since the start of interactive games and IRC on the Internet. Much discussion (Jones, 1995, 1998) has centred around how authentic a community can be if it is 'only' online. In essence, this line of enquiry has led to an interrogation of what constitutes community in RL (real life) or f2f (face to face), and which elements of this physical interaction are missing when relationships are forged instead in cyberspace. This may be addressing the wrong issue. If apples are compared with oranges, then differences will be found, but this is not to deny that both online and f2f communities have a role, and offer value. An investigation of how online interaction helps people meet their needs for community, and why so many people who are active in online

exchanges discuss their experience in terms of community, has the potential to help us understand more about community both on and offline. Again, this is a qualitative enterprise.

Pre-Internet mass media has long been recognised as 'genred', with consumption patterns for soap opera (for example) differing significantly from that for news and current affairs. Equivalent differentiation between different strands of Internet genres and uses—such as games, news, fan sites, etc.—is required to make sense of the ways in which the Internet audience is creating meaning from their interactions online. As foreshadowed earlier, this has workplace/domestic dimensions, and an audience studies project would potentially deliver critical information about the domestic production of cultural materials in Internet contexts. Although Nightingale (1990, p. 33) and others have highlighted the importance of commercial mass media to the work of consumption, using the mass media does not itself produce a product that others consume (over and above ratings data). With interactivity on the Internet there is a reflexivity to consumption, which also involves production.

WHAT IS THE RELEVANCE OF INTERNET USERS BEING CONTENT CREATORS AS WELL AS CONSUMERS?

The Internet has frequently been discussed as if it were a homogeneous medium, or a unitary entity, whereas it is (arguably) a technology platform through which a number of genred media are created or made available, many of which offer a variety of levels of engagement. The ambiguity of the technology/medium distinction as applied to the Internet is another issue which could/should be addressed by qualitative research. Indeed, it is possible to conceptualise the Internet as having more complexity, variety, and information/communication potential than the totality of pre-digital mass media. Scholars, researchers, financiers, and advertisers struggle to find terms in which to discuss the Internet audience and its relationship to information, entertainment, and communication channels on/in the net.

What is the nature and significance of the Internet (and of human interaction within it) from the perspective of the domestic consumption/production of culture? The conceptual significance of such an investigation is that it informs a theoretical reconsideration of how far audience theory can be applied to Internet participants, and how far the Internet's interactive features make it unlike any mass media to date. Indeed, carrying out audience studies research with Internet users would allow the exploration of complex interactions of mass media-like

websites and search engines, niche media services and communities, and one-to-one, two-way, private communications (including communications that can function like Dayan's 1998 'particularistic' media).

Also of relevance is the online moderation of Internet participation. Morley (1986) made visible the interpersonal dynamics of who allowed whom to watch what in which circumstances, in terms of family television. These interactions expressed power in the domestic realm and were dynamic—changing with the people present in the home, with the day, with the time of day, and with the specific circumstances and family routines and rituals. These levels of power and control are likely to have their counterparts in terms of who uses online services and when, within domestic (and work) contexts. In addition to this 'offline control' of online activity, there is a further element of online control of online activity through interactive moderation, and through flaming. (Flaming is the use of disapproving postings to curb unacceptable net behaviour and establish norms of netiquette.)

OBSERVATION/PARTICIPATION IN AN IRC COMMUNICATION CLASS

Flamers have a significant function in evolving and establishing online communities. Moderators on IRC channels (as was demonstrated in a class practicum, Palandri & Green, forthcoming) regularly removed the right of an offending chatter to participate. Order is achieved by this method—albeit in a temporary or transitory way. Younger chatters (under 25), using an online language radically more aggressive/offensive than their public RL communication patterns, were dealt with swiftly and without warning: they were booted out of the chat forum. The VL (virtual life) practice of profanity for profanity's sake may be a youthful way of 'breaking out'—almost like verbal graffiti. 'They are free to act in a context divorced from external measures of response, be they positive or negative' (Reid, 1995, p. 174).

Palandri and Green's observation-participation in an Australian student online laboratory in September 1999 (coupled with informal interviews with adolescents and their friends about their online activities) tends to indicate that under-25s may use obscenities and defamation (flames/flaming) more than older people (40+). For younger chatters, introductions are closely followed by requests for 'stats' (statistics: age, gender, height, weight, colour of hair and eyes, and physical proportions). Without much 'foreplay', the younger MUD chatters will ask/be asked for cybersex. This probably reflects their 'age and stage' rather than any technological determinism exerted by chat sites. 'The single largest category of MUDders are college students, age 17 to 23,

and the particular uses they find for this technology—identity play and sexual innuendo—reflect the preoccupations of that population’ (Rheingold, 1993). However, it is clear that males and females, young and old, sense a freedom to express a side of themselves on the net that is generally taboo in relation to their peers, their family, and society in general.

It is possible that older chatters are more inclined to experiment with their communication in a sexual or sensual manner, as opposed to younger chatters’ engagement with ‘disruption for the fun of it’. Through the anonymity the screen affords, both genders are able to practise various role-plays and configurations, and learn what it is that works not only for their own RL gender, but also for the other.

The anonymity and dynamic, playful quality of the medium have a powerful, disinhibiting effect on behaviour. People allow themselves to behave in ways very different from ordinary, everyday life, to express previously unexplored aspects of their personalities, much as they do when wearing masks and costumes at a carnival or a masked ball. (Danet, 1998, p. 131)

RESEARCH TRAJECTORIES

Initial investigations and a literature search suggest that an audience studies approach could usefully concentrate upon two major groupings of Internet users, Under 25 and Over 40. This would potentially allow for critical distinctions to be made between those who ‘grew up’ with interactive game playing and open-ended narrative structures, and those who had deliberately to master these communication challenges in the context of the Internet. Participation rates need not be addressed *per se*—the commercial agenda is already concerned with these—but the meanings of participation for those who are involved would be critical.

It is reasonable to assume, given gendered differences in technology use and communications patterns, that there might be gender-related differences between male and female participation practices on the Internet. Similarly (as indicated above) there may be three categories of Internet usage: ‘light users’, ‘heavy users’, and people who are no longer such heavy users as they once were—people whose Internet usage might have ‘peaked’. An interrogation along these lines would produce a research (audience studies) interview grid that considered twelve groups:

	Female			Male		
	Light	Heavy	Peaked	Light	Heavy	Peaked
Under 25	X	X	X	X	X	X
Over 40	X	X	X	X	X	X

A semi-structured, open-ended, interviewee-directed format (Green, 1999) would allow space for excitement and enthusiasm on the part of the interviewee. Interviews analysed according to principles of grounded theory (Strauss, 1987) would also permit respondents' comments to frame critical concepts (within the context of a semi-structured format).

Palandri comments, in the first person, upon her early forays online (Palandri & Green, in press):

Anything you had ever wondered about could be put in the search box and moments later a myriad of information arrived. I had entered virtual reality as a seeker of the real. Through my foray into surfing I found the decidedly unreal, and the out-of-this-world. My brain ran amuck. Here was a medium which would not judge me should I search for the less socially acceptable facts of life. I became covert for a while. Even though I knew no one was in the room whilst I searched, I felt guilt—and sometimes deep embarrassment—at what I found and hurriedly minimised the window or shut down. I felt, as many others have, that I was walking on the wild side. I started to write erotica as an outlet for my frustrated creativity. I found many women were doing the same thing. Most of us were expressing ourselves in ways that had never been acceptable to society or family in our roles as mothers, wives, daughters, co-workers and so on. From the safety of my office chair, I had slipped over to the wrong side of town.

We need to know more about the meanings people are making as they leave the domestic and venture into cyberspace, contributing to cyberculture as they go. The concept of the audience and the borrowed research clothes of audience studies may not be the entire recipe for what is required, but it is a start. Once that start is made, and we can see the strengths and weaknesses of the result, then we can start crafting tools that investigate Internet audiences as though they were ... participants, content producers, and online users.

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