

A critical analysis of two audience prototypes and their participatory dimensions¹

Miroljub Radojković²

Ana Milojević

Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Serbia

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Summary: This article discusses how the concept of audience theory has been developed within two basic intellectual traditions, resulting in two basic prototypes. On one side, there is the trajectory of the “mass audience” that was created and developed parallel with the emergence of the media of mass communication. The mass audience is regarded as a multi-layer collectivity, residing at the end of a successive linear communication process – sender, channel, message, receiver and effects. In this one-way communication model, the audience is primarily the receiving structure, with little or no opportunity for feedback and participation in the communication process.

The other prototype is linked to the development of new digital media and the internet; here the public is theoretically considered as “cross media” and active. The audience of new media is seen as a heterogeneous and structural collective in the communication model that characterizes the flow of information “many to many”. This prototype attributes to the new, active audiences or users unlimited power to participate and shape the communication processes.

We discuss features of the two prototypes, including media usage, media access, information resources, time engagement and functions derived from media use. The most important feature we take up, however, is participation. We point out the problems and limitations of both prototypes in this regard. On the one hand the study of audiences has long been rooted in the concept of mass audience and limited with its primal orientation towards the effects of mass communication, while on the other hand, the emerging prototype 2 is all too easily granted participatory capacities, especially concerning the public sphere. Therefore, the theorists of new and old media must step outside the prevailing postulates and consider the audience beyond the two prevailing prototypes in order to further deepen our knowledge and understanding of contemporary audiences and their participation.

Key words: mass audience, active audience, participation, media convergence, new media, virtual communication

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² miroljub.radojkovic@fpm.bg.ac.rs

1. Introduction

In our thinking about the information society, whose beginning can easily be traced back to the early 19th century, we as scholars tend to ignore the mass media landscape, as it has been perceived in the past decades. In slipstream of this “novel” way of thinking, the concept of audience becomes affected as well. The convergence of mass media with information and telecommunication technologies, which has been labelled the third significant media-morphosis in human history³, goes hand in hand with a structural transformation of the audience, which in turn is captured in a new way of conceptualizing the audience. In this era of overall commercialization of the mass media systems, it was the audience that finally stepped out of the shadow of money. In Fidler’s (2004: 176) words: “Almost through the entire twentieth century, media and advertisers had a mutually useful and interdependent relation. However, because the audience of mass media has become more fragmented and puzzling, capability of newspapers, magazines, television and radio to bring advertisers in touch with potential consumers went down.” New communication forms are enabled by the ever-rising number of digital gadgets that serve as means of information, entertainment and education. Through their usage citizens spontaneously form new collectivities, for which the old label of “mass” is becoming inapplicable.

Yet, the inability of the concept of the mass media audience to capture all audience practices should not be seen as a point of rupture in media history, leading to the erasure of this concept, but rather as a process of deconstruction with an indefinite end (see Webster and Phalen, 1997). As long as mass media survive, some oases of mass audience will survive along with new media participatory and interactive audiences (or “users”). Moreover, the new ways of thinking about the audience should not necessarily be seen as unique and all-encompassing. Both the concept of the mass media audience and the concept of the digital media audience have their flaws and limitations, in that each excludes a variety of practices. This article aims to look at these two audience models, in order to show the exclusions that characterize both of them, with a special focus on how they deal with the concept of participation. This dichotomous, archetypical approach, with a focus on conceptual reductions will allow us to emphasize a co-presence of both models, in which each can strengthen the other to better understand the wide variety of audience practices.

³ Two preceding media-morphoses were mainly associated with the language procession in written and broadcasting media technologies (Fidler, 2004).

2. Two audience prototypes

In this article we will thus start from two main prototypes of the audience, which have played, and still play, a dominant role in thinking the audience. The concept of the “prototype” will be used as a means of categorization, where some elements of a category (of audience) are more central than others. Prototypes or proto-instances combine the most representative attributes of a category that serve as benchmarks, knowing that they simplify and reduce. What will be labelled as audience prototype 1 refers to the mass audience. New collectives associated with the use of digital media will be referred to as the Type 2 audience. Both theoretical concepts will be discussed separately, and then summarized in Table 1, at the end of this discussion.

2.1 Audience prototype 1

In the frame of his sociological discussion about mass, the public and the public opinion, Blumer (1946) introduced the concept of mass audience. The mass audience was portrayed as a multi-layer collective that existed at the end of the linear, sequential process of mass communication (sender, channel, message, receiver, effects). These layers were structured according to their relatively stable socio-demographic attributes, such as age, sex, education, level of income, profession, etc. On the one hand, it has been noted that some of these common qualities could predict the audience’s choice of media and its products. For example, men read more newspapers than women, youth visits cinema more frequently than older generations, and the typical audience of TV serials is female. On the other hand, the mass audience was steadily divided into subgroups (readers, listeners, viewers), preferring different mass media, separately or combined. In this sense, both social and technological factors were ferment in the field of information. As McQuail (1997: 2) wrote: “Audiences are both a product of social context (which leads to shared cultural interests, understandings, and information needs) and a response to a particular pattern of media provision.”

Apart from being linear, the described mass communication process is characterized as a one-to-many model of communication. This model left little space for the audience to participate in mass communication, with the exception of minimal feedback loops. Occasional, measurable re-actions from the audience were taken in consideration as a form of participation. Indirectly, ratings of listeners and viewers, and circulation figures of newspapers were also

regarded as important feedback for media businesses. In addition, there were some very limited channels in mass communication for the audience to give a direct response: letters to the editors, telephone calls to broadcasters, complaints to ombudsmen, fans' organizations, etc.

A more significant participative capacity was assigned to the public, a different citizens' collective. To quote McQuail (1997: 6 – emphasis in original) again: “The ‘*public*’ is a product of modern conditions, especially when seen as an element in the institution of democratic politics. It consists of a set of people who engage freely in the discussion of some public issue, with a view to advancing some opinion, interest, policy, or proposal for change.” Although the public is structurally different from the audience (Dewey, 1927), the public was (in the early fifties) accepted as the subject of public opinion. The apparent lack of will, tools and capability to participate *continuously* in public discussions, e.g. the public sphere, made citizens a sort of problematic subject from the theoretical horizons of public opinion, which in turn justified the re-use of the attribute of mass (audience), whose political will was only expressed through the logics of voting combined with private debating. In addition (and much later), participation that was organized “for” the mass audience often remained minimal (Carpentier 2011), and can even often be described as pseudo-participation (as for instance in many Reality TV programmes).

Within this model the audience becomes articulated as passive, and often seen as focussed on leisure, gratification and escape. Functionalist analysts (see Wright, 1974) focused on the following (pre-defined) social needs: orientation, cohesion, cultural continuity, social control and public information. Regarding individuals, functionalists have added personal guidance, relaxation, information, adjustment and identity-building to their inventory. Age was frequently treated as an attribute of audience prototype 1, since the results of many empirical researches showed that heavy use of media, especially TV, was associated with late age and social marginalization. While searching for media effects many related phenomena were elucidated. Spending its leisure time by, basically, consuming mass media content, the audience prototype 1 is perceived as open to the risk of becoming “psychologically illiterate”. As behaviourists suggested, this was one of the pivotal mass media “effects”. Even functionalists treated such a risk as unacceptable, calling it a “narcotizing dysfunction” of the mass media (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1975). Moreover, this was combined with the threat of psychological indifference and alienation. What audience members perceived as gratifying experiences was redefined as “escapism”. As Katz and Foulkes (1962:

380) wrote: “Alienation may mean the feeling of powerlessness or meaninglessness, or the feeling of ideological or social isolation. Alienation produces the desire to escape, a desire which the mass media are presumed to be instrumental in satisfying.” After its development in the late 1930s, versions of this type of critical attitude enshrined in the first audience prototype – deriving from a range of theoretical standpoints – are still current, as Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2009: 207) argue: “Along these lines, critical scholars such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1947), Postman (1985), have voiced severe concerns about mass audiences alienation to be the drive for escapist media use indulging in light-hearted content while not facing and avoiding the issues of actual importance.”

2.2 Problems with the audience prototype 1

Lack of participation

One of the main problems of the audience prototype 1 is that the audience members were seen as the “victims of control” exercised by mass media. Various schools of thought in communication theory attribute different origins of control over the media content and related audience cognitions (see for example Mattelart and Mattelart, 1998). In USA, this approach has had the status of “dominant paradigm” for a long time (Hardt, 1992). Although people are seen as free to avoid the views and values expressed through the media, there is an emphasis on the difficulties they have to resist temptation, because communicators are generally perceived as subjects with more information, better knowledge and more expertise. This control over resources is manifested through the structure of mass media ownership and production, by performing persuasive forms of political and economic marketing, as well as by communication strategies of the political actors insisting on their responsibility and right to make political decisions. Again, this kind of social power is distributed unequally. And therefore, in mass audience theories, the power of the communicators over the audience, seen as an individual member or as a collective, has always been taken for granted.

Despite this reductionist and problematic framework that ignored audience activity and pleasure, we should recognize that audience participation was indeed structurally hampered in (and by) audience prototype 1. This is because the social distance between the audience and mass media production was more considerable than the possible needs and channels for feedback. Content participation was limited by the predominance of gatekeepers, and the engagement of audience prototype 1 in media systems and political life turned

out to have more disappointing than encouraging outcomes: “Public audience experience normally involves some degree of identification with a wider social grouping – whether defined as fans, or citizens, or a local population or a taste culture.” (McQuail, 1997: 91) There are exceptions, though, from the previously mentioned public roles. As Hasebrink et al. (2007: 13) suggest, these other forms of potential participation of mass audience include, for example, viewers’ organizations related to political lobby/protection of minors/media, pluralism/cultural diversity; consumer’s organizations; and initiatives related to media education. However, these forms of participation for the most part have not been extensive, and possible identifications with such public roles have not significantly strengthened the position of the mass audience *vis à vis* the mass media.

Ignorance of local/community media

Often excluded from the prototype 1 audience were the groups that have some kind of local or community awareness and a sense of belonging. These collectivities usually gather around local or community media, either broadcast or printed (and recently complemented by online versions). These segments of the (mass) audience were partly able to escape low interactivity with the public communicators and high social control by “hidden communicators” involved within mainstream media, since the social distance between the audience and the local/community media turned out to be rather small and the local audience’s assessment of what is of “news value” was close to the value perceived by the local/community media ‘gate keepers’. In addition, local/community media are spaces where, as Kean (1995: 378) suggests, “micro public spheres” can emerge. His hope was that the local media could serve small, relaxed public spheres, and that these media in turn could be supported by citizens, both financially and by volunteering in program-making and management. A similar argument was made by Dahlgren and Sparks (1991: 15): “Perhaps this is the first sign of a new, two-tiered public sphere, where the alternative movement media, with their stronger link to the experiences and interpretations of the everyday lives of their members, have a growing political capacity to transmit their versions of political reality to the dominant media. This serves both to diffuse and legitimate a wider array of viewpoints and information.” Local/community media grew thanks to the low price of communication technologies, especially in Europe (but also in Latin America and Africa). Thus, the participation of local/community mass media audience members could be developed quickly

and even have some influence upon the local political field. However, analytic enthusiasm should be tempered, as local/community audiences, media and publics exert low influence on making the most important top political decisions. They are additionally weakened by the fact that general mass audience neglects these media, based on (mainstream media) arguments related to their tiny circulation and rating figures.

Lack of attention for fans

Inventories of mass audience “participation”, as discussed above, have missed another important subgroup. Fans, as a subgroup of the mass audience, were often perceived and theorized with a negative connotation. They were seen as being enthralled by the modern celebrity system via the mass media, with one-sidedness and a non-political passion ascribed to them as main attributes. Their consumption behaviour was described as “deviant”, because of the creation of a strong para-social interaction with the celebrity figures as the object of fandom. Treated as cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers, they were presumed to act as the hysterical members of a crowd, associated with violence and irrational mob behaviour (Jensen, 1992: 10). A number of authors contested this negative concept of fan culture, suggesting that fans were consumers who also produce, readers who also write, and spectators who also participate (see Fiske, 1989; Jenkins, 1992; Kloet and van Zoonen, 2007).

One nuance here is that the fan subgroups of the mass audience are nowadays perceived less negatively. It is unclear whether this is the consequence of a better insight, or the consequence of freer and easier access to the objects of fandom. We can only agree with Hills’ (2002: 44) assessment about the fans’ identity as comprising “[...] in one sense ‘ideal consumers’ since their consumption habits can be very highly predicted by the culture industry, and are likely to remain stable. But fans also express anti-commercial beliefs (or ideologies, we might say, since these beliefs are not entirely in alignment with the cultural situation in which fans find themselves).”

Fans were important, as they also used to be the only self-organized collective within the mass audience. Of course, they maintained their internal organization by means and channels of interpersonal communication. Fans’ production is *enunciative* (Fiske, 1989: 34) in a sense that the meanings produced inside a specific fan group are shared within a face-to-face or oral culture and articulated in a semi-public form. The generation and circulation of such meanings and commodities did not necessarily remain detached from the local

community, since the fan production circulates inside the community, and can be categorized as “narrowcasting”, as opposed to “broadcasting”. Fandom constitutes an alternative social community, based on communication with others, often scattered across a broad geographic area, and who may never – or only occasionally – meet face to face, but are sharing a common sense of identity and interests.

2.3 Audience prototype 2

Computer networks, mobile phones, e-book readers, etc., have mutated into a new kind of media, which will be referred to as digital media in this article. These changes also impact on the definition of the audience: “These media differ radically from traditional ones in several respects: entry is cheap, the number of practitioners is limitless, geography is not a barrier, communication is a two way process and the audience have the power in terms of how and when content is consumed.” (Breen, 2007: 55) Therefore, social communication processes are not seen as linear and sequential any more, and the focus is placed on the many-to-many model of communication.

In audience prototype 2, there is a structural shift (see Carpentier, 2009) towards an active audience that is active in a material way, deploying a variety of activities (and not exclusively actively interpreting mainstream media texts). Quite often the concept of the user is used to signify this change. As Cover (2006: 149) says, digital media allow: “[...] not only the recording and re-recording of the text and some ability to distribute it independently, but to re-sequence the text, re-order it, change its quality, and so on, all in accord with the imaginative requirements of the audience-user.” The roles of the communicator and the recipient in the information flow and their interaction are seen as much more intertwined within virtual communication of digital media. Everyone is seen to be enabled to simultaneously exercise the freedom of speech and the freedom to be a reader, listener, viewer or even all of these at once. Audiences have gained sophisticated tools to intervene in all kinds of communicated “texts”, for instance acting as citizen journalists or producing user-generated content.

With audience prototype 2, the existing social networks, blogs, forums, interactive portals, etc., testify that a new social context – we are accustomed to calling it the “information society” – has emerged. It is claimed that communication technology is setting people back to the “life world”, making it more a reality than a utopian oasis. The opportunity to communicate freely

opens up the potential public spheres and public discourse, providing an easy access as well as the impetus for the shaping of new social movements, for commenting and opposing governmental decisions, and for practicing the original forms of political activities, although they are often also seen as moving away from institutionalized politics. Since the audience prototype 2 belongs to different interpretative virtual communities, it has a better chance to escape the manipulation and to delegitimize discourses controlled by the carriers of social power. They can contribute to the formation of the public opinion, as an actor in social issues identification and solution, as a critic of a political order or as a resource for protest. The active audience also intervenes directly in public discourse. The audience is in command of the channels that are capable of sending back, instantly and easily, opinions and attitudes to the mass and digital media. The audience's ability to comment on official information is one of tools for an alternative re-framing of the news expressed in the "ruling language", or to open up the hidden aspects of messages in the news. If citizens communicate through the digital networks, they engender new phenomena such as the "partial public" or the "counter-public". In the first case, social movements with little resources use the new technologies to make their issues visible and to gain the attention of the policy makers, mass media and other citizens. In the latter case, citizens who participate in the network communication give expression through discourse, symbols and actions that challenge, and sometimes deconstruct, the established public beliefs supported by the political actors and the mainstream media.

Digital media audiences are not only seen to be active in a wide variety of virtual communities using a similarly wide variety of opportunities for self-presentation, but their capacity to perform "cultural jamming" is also emphasized. Thus, audience prototype 2 is not only seen as capable of freely decoding of cultural products on offered, but also of making, re-shaping or destroying the official cultural matrix (Dahlgren, 2008: 197). The simultaneous existence, appearance and disappearance of sub-cultural movements and contents are not comparable with the phenomena from the period of mass communication and mass audience. What used to be ignored and considered as the "alternative" for the mainstream media is now articulated as the predominant form of the postmodern digital culture. This phenomenon is referred to as *the mash-up cultures* by Sonvila-Weis (2010), *the remix culture* by Castells (2009), and *the convergence culture* by Jenkins (2006). As Carpentier (2011: 112) stresses: "This line of arguments emphasizes the processes of collective action and community

building that support the digital participatory culture bypassing the traditional organizational structures.”

Age still plays a crucial role in the construction of audience prototype 2, as is exemplified by the generational discourse of the digital or internet natives. Compared to these internet natives, i.e. the youth, the so-called internet migrants, who usually overlap with a great deal of core mass media audience, and the elderly become marginalized. An illustration can be found in van Dijk (2007: 186) “They comprise a quarter to a third of the population of (even) the most advanced high-tech societies. Increasingly, they become equal to the lowest social classes [...] At this stage of new media diffusion, the unconnected still contain a large proportion of elderly people, some of higher social class, but isolated socially and without access to computers and Internet.”

2.4 Problems with the audience prototype 2

Gaps in the theoretical framework

The internet revolution opened a new angle on the audience, which now is often treated as an “active audience”. This concept is not entirely new and was not coined solely in relation to Web 2.0. The active/passive audience dispute has its roots in the tradition of mass media audience research too. The emergence of the active audience concept can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s, with Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980) and Fiske’s (1987) emphasis on subversive audience power. This period was marked as the shift from passive audience theory towards the active one with the power to interpret media messages in line with specific individual, social and cultural conditions (see Carpentier, 2011; Press and Livingstone, 2006; Williams, 2003; Biocca, 1998). The active audience is engaged in the signification and interpretation of the media messages, doing it independently from the intentions of the message-senders. The core of the active audience engagement is almost completely different from the mass audience activities discussed above. As a general phenomenon, it is well summarized by Press and Livingstone (2006: 178): “The active audience research is significant because it challenged the grand claims about dominant ideology, media imperialism and media power [...] posing ideas of heterogeneity against homogenization, of active against passive, of resistant against exploited audiences.” Many of these propositions, used in the academic and common discourse, celebrate deliberation of the audience with the upheaval of the new digital media.

However, if we compare the pace of innovations in the field of digital media with the theoretical conceptualization of new audiences, theory is apparently lagging behind. Certain kinds of theoretical bias in favour of the digital media can mask shortcomings of the audience prototype 2: “The discourse of novelty also feeds into the technological-determinist model, assuming that specific media technologies are by definition more participatory than others.” (Carpentier, 2009: 410) One solution is to look at audience activities from the traditionally established perspectives: the individual, the medium and the culture.

At the *individual* level, audience prototype 2 is seen to get a bigger chance for access and choice. The precondition is, of course, the possession of the technological means and computer literacy. The initial enthusiastic discourse about the audience prototype 2's access and choice was significantly revised by the digital divide debate. The initial arguments about opening up the public arena for every individual (to actively and freely participate in, raise issues and personal standpoints, ...) were contrasted with the serious constraints to participation posed by: age, race, class, social status and gender. If we take the *media* perspective, then we should mention the emphasis on the access of audiences to the process of message production. Here audience prototype 2 is seen to overlap with what was presumed to be exclusively the job of professionals, because as “citizen journalists”, they are alternative sources of information, entertainment and education. This way, the participative audience challenges the power of classic media organizations, but often the exact nature of the new relationship between audiences and professionals remains unclear, and the differences between audience prototype 2 and media professionals are not elaborated upon. From the perspective of *culture*, the rise of the interactive production of symbols is seen as enabling altered patterns of expression and thought. However, the endurance of such new cultures is questionable. For example, some pieces of digital cultural products exist only as long as the screens and lasers are switched on. Their audiences also exist only until the new cultural deed disappears, after the switch is turned off, unless it is being recorded in some way.

Problems with participation

In the context of participation, we have to shed some light on the forms and levels of its aggregation, or rather on its potential to form socially relevant groups. Conversation became the keyword of communication in the new social context, bringing along the continual discussions about the de-massification of the audience. The audience is not seen as “mass” any more, but rather as a set

of diversified, self-structured collectivities that are in a flux. Nowadays, the high participation of the audience prototype 2 is being taken for granted. Ironically, in the light of audience theory and research development, the question for contemporary scholars should be: is an inactive or passive audience even possible in the expansive universe of Web 2.0?

Higher levels of participation (not interaction) is still more a theoretical expectation than an embodied practice, and the virtual communities are not primarily used for deliberation, or for pursuing political or other interests and goals, but rather for the self-representation. Until now, civil society actors have been able to use the interactive possibilities of the communication network, “[...] only on a relatively small scale. Because of the lack of a narrow filter of mass media, the network seems to be more interesting as a medium of self-presentation and taking public positions, rather than as a medium for the exchange of views and discourse.” (Grunwald et al., 2006: 229) Thus, as long as audience prototype 2 mistakes clicking the “like” button with participation/action, the changes in the given social order will remain rather small.

Admittedly, individual activism⁴ within audience prototype 2 is seen to undermine (to a certain extent) the power of political and economic institutions dependent on citizen support (in terms of votes, attention and consumption). But again, this model is not without problems: hack-tivism is a private and anonymous endeavour, and therefore carries low potential for mass participation. The broader version, electronic civic disobedience, does not seem to impress contemporary power centres that there is a genuine risk of their functions to be taken over by citizens through new forms of participation, or, that their work could be blocked by new forms of social resistance of people sitting in private hubs of social networks and the blogosphere. Still, political institutions did not change significantly, because deep restructuring in political field did not happen (yet) (with the exception of the crash of the global neoliberal ideology). Information highways, in the metaphorical sense, are not one-way streets, but to a great extent, it remains the same in real life. In critical situations, politicians, administrations, and companies could simply unplug from the virtual communication and ignore the voices coming from the invisible social space.

⁴ Since the Sixties, petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, blockades and other forms of “digital civic disobedience” become unconventional, permanent factors of the political repertoire of Western representative democracies. A more creative, more expensive, and thus less widespread way of protesting is cloning or “defacement” of enemies’ web pages. There is also the possibility to create the so-called “fake Web sites”, where some famous powerful institutions (such <http://www.gatt.org>) are hiding under another domain name or stolen domain names, such as <http://www.worldbunk.org> or <http://www.whirledbank.org> that spread the bad word about an organization, jeopardizing their reputation.

Problems with power distribution

As Jenkins (2006: 3) argues, some consumers have greater abilities than others to participate in the emerging information society: “Not all participants are created equal. Corporations – and even individuals within corporate media – exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers.” Table 1 offers a summary comparison of the two audience prototypes, and one can readily see how prototype 2 correlates with the digitalization of industry and the reduced need for manpower. In many post-industrial countries young generations (e.g. internet natives and typical cross-audience members) are desperately searching for employment. Power relations in the new communication models must not be overseen, although only few researchers trace the “effects” within the active audience. Large corporations, media giants and advertising moguls did not die out. In line with the political economists’ thesis, they are still manufacturing consumers for their products, using new digital media to their advantage. The “netizens” still have to buy computers, gadgets and software, and have to pay for maintenance and internet connections, if they are eager to participate.

The majority of global social networks (like Facebook) are oriented towards making profit, and are extracting value from the free accumulation of participants’ personal data and social relations. From this perspective it is true that: “profit participatory platforms are not simply about facilitating regimes of meaning production and circulation, but about inviting users to express themselves in order to produce a large amount of free labour or marketable data.” (Langlois, 2011: 4) As long as the new digital media are satisfying the same core human needs, or as long as audiences gain the same gratifications from the digital media, their gratifications will become “resources” for profit making power agents. Of course, cross-media audiences still use new media for old purposes: voters to make free and rational choices; consumers to acquire goods and services quickly and comfortably; citizens to get benefits from state and social services, etc. Also politicians, PR campaigners and advertisers count on the new media, predominantly as a new instrument to improve their traditional jobs.

Moreover, the content of new media in virtual communication is perceived as largely free of the gatekeepers. The reality, however, is decidedly otherwise: There are indeed gatekeepers, and these recent ones are far more dangerous, for they have an impersonal shape and name – the search engine. Despite of the apparent formal conformity at work when searching for new knowledge,

these engines can mislead users in a projected direction. As Gerhards and Schafer (2010: 156) explains: “This means that although a large variety of the actors and different standpoints can be found somewhere on the internet, and although the NGO websites, blogs, discussion boards, etc. will provide practically every conceivable viewpoint on their respective website, it is unlikely that the average user will find this content. This is due to the fact that only the respective URL, not a search engine, would bring the user to an alternative page.” Thanks to the high number of links and the frequent visits, the websites of political and economic power-holders appear at the top of the search engines’ lists. Therefore, the average user of the internet faces difficulties in searching for alternative sources of information and argumentation in the electronic jungle. Apart from one-to-many communication models, which remain on the internet websites, the developing many-to-one models (Wikipedia for example) and many-to-many (conversation) models are gradually saturating the virtual communication, provoking an information overload. Paradoxically, the information “overload” will diminish the diversity of public discourses, if the member of audience prototype 2 does not have enough time and dedication to invest in searching the Web 2.0 themselves.

The forgotten risk of escapism

Although the passivity of the audience prototype 1 was associated with a long-time exposure to mass media (especially TV), leading to alienation and escapism, the same risk must not be ignored as far as the audience prototype 2 is concerned. In this sense, audience prototype 2 hides the possibility that a new kind of escapism (equal to the previously described narcotizing dysfunction of mass media) could reappear among dwellers of the network society, composed of numerous virtual communities and spaces. Therefore, the early warning about non-participation posed by Fidler (2004: 255) should be supported: “Ever rising capability to filter and direct information, in order to satisfy ever smaller interests alongside with possibility to ‘live’ in self created virtual communities – and to avoid real involvement in community and its responsibilities – are serious causes for worry.”

Data about popular social networks (Facebook, Linked-in, MySpace, etc.) point out that audience prototype 2 uses them not only to get involved in the community, but rather as a means of self-representation and self-socialization. It is, therefore, still plausible to talk about escapism. Statistically, every Face-

book user has an average of 130 “friends”⁵. It is hard for a person to interact with so many people in real life, let alone to befriend them. This indicates the risk of “empty interaction”, taking in account how much time and content must be invested in a social network. This kind of the social network search and exchange is equally time-consuming as the “narcotizing” television watching. Furthermore, if many of the “friends” inside the networks have never met in real life (and probably never will), this practice fits partly to the old thesis about mass audience escapism (as well as representing an instance of pseudo-accumulation of social capital). And we must not forget that Second Life, and similar platforms, that are highly interactive, free and participatory, but yet created on the premise of the made up identity (creatively re-invented self) and on the creation of virtual life and life-like relations.

2.5 A summary of the two audience prototypes

The authors hope that the article was clear enough to indicate the comparative differences between old and contemporary, mass and active, type 1 and type 2 audiences. This juxtaposition was aimed to serve as a platform, on which our approach to participation of both kinds of audiences is based, and that will, hopefully, provide some relevant insights. Instead of a discussion of theoretical research results, we suggest a systemized overview in the form of a table. It starts with a set of social attributes, by which audience models clearly split into two prototypes that encompass different ways (and problems) of audience participation.

Table 1: Two audience prototypes

Attributes	AUDIENCE PROTOTYPE 1	AUDIENCE PROTOTYPE 2
Age	Older	Younger
Socio-economic status	Low	Better off, perspective poor
Cross-media use tradition	Poor	Short, but intensive
Access to new media	Low, computer illiteracy	High, computer literate, use of different digital platforms
Information sources	Traditional mass media, basically TV	New digital platforms
Time engagement	High, “heavy” use of mass media	High use of social networks and internet facilities

⁵ Facebook Statistics <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>.

Attributes	AUDIENCE PROTOTYPE 1	AUDIENCE PROTOTYPE 2
Functions derived from media use	Leisure, gratifications; escape from reality	Socializing in virtual communities; self-presentation; individual activism
Treated by the media as	Consumers, spectators and fans	Users, content makers and discussants
Modalities of participation	AUDIENCE PROTOTYPE 1	AUDIENCE PROTOTYPE 2
Expressing political will	Voting	Not very keen to vote, a cynical attitude to politics in general
Political participation	Public protesting through petitions and rallies	Protesting in social networks, disseminating and sending of e-petitions, spamming; defacing
Civil engagement	Private debating about meanings in public discourse	Public negotiating about meanings in public discourse on blogs and forums
Audience interactivity	Sending feedback to mass media	Creating user generated contents that partly enter into media and partly circulates through the net as citizen journalism
Audience participation	Pseudo participation in “reality shows” and other interactive media formats	Participation in socio-political activities of virtual communities, challenging, denying and confirming public discourse by citizen journalism
Public sphere engagement	Forming of “micro public spheres” around local mass media	Forming plenty but temporary interpretative and meaning sharing public spheres around new media

3. Conclusion

This article provides an overview of the audience theory development, anchored in the two dominant models of the media audiences: the mass audience (referred to as audience prototype 1 associated with mass media in this article) and the new, active audience (audience prototype 2 associated with digital media). Scholars articulate them largely as the audience ideal types, entering

therefore in disputes about two different general concepts: the world of “bad” against the world of “good” audiences. On the one hand, there is the theoretical vision of the passive audience: atomized members of a mass, conformists, vulnerable victims of control. On the other hand, there is a vision of an active audience as it should be: individualistic, community building, impervious to influence, creative and productive, shuttling from digital to traditional media.

Outside these ideal types the situation is not so black and white. Each audience variant is in fact more complex, more nuanced than the simplified models suggest. The mass media and mass audience still exist. The audience of digital media is expanding, bringing new qualities but shortcomings as well. Hence, out there, in real-reality, both types of audience exist simultaneously, having in most cases the same individuals as twofold members.

Both audience prototype 1 and 2 have proven to be fluctuating collectivities. Apparently, today it is necessary to understand the word audience as “*pluralia tantum*” and research it as a twofold, cross-media audience. Schröder (2011: 6) introduces this term in order to encompass “[...] all kinds of contemporary user engagement with media, be they sense-making as in reception research, or participatory in the sense of Web 2.0.” For members of the cross-media audience are dispersed, not only in space and time, but across numerous virtual communities as well. It is worth mentioning that they often temporarily belong to more than one virtual (and real) community and have a low level of loyalty to any communication channel at their disposal. Compared to the members of mass media audience, the prototype 2 audience’s new experience in media use is shorter but more intensive. At the same time, the younger cross-media audience members are said to be – as internet natives – computer literate and capable to benefit from all services enabled by the internet, mobile phones, e-book readers and other digital platforms. In theory, this knowledge and skills could enrich their cultural capital, but, as shown above, there is a gloomy road ahead as far as employment and social mobility of internet natives are concerned.

The political systems of the representative democracies allow civil society interventions into the media field and public sphere. This is an exercise of human rights and freedoms “[...] civil society in the media sphere can be characterized as an audience constellation, which is discursive, independent, pluralistic, bound to life worlds and oriented towards the common welfare. With these characteristics, civil society has got a special sensitivity for problems and concerns of viewers and can articulate them into the political process.” (Dahlgren quoted in Hasebrink et al., 2007: 79). This prediction is theoretically correct

but still not fully realized. The constellation of power and the level of engagement of civil society institutions and movements have not yet prevailed in the political process. Correspondingly, one should not be overly optimistic in one's expectations of new kinds of audience participation that could influence the established orders. As a researcher of audience prototype 2 reports: "[...] the predominance of groups with a social, rather than political or economic mode of engagement suggests that, while these groups are helpful in fostering internal trust and social solidarity, they may not be so strong in cultivating skills in deliberation and debate [...] they are largely apolitical in focus and most capable of producing goods that are oriented toward the individual member's 'personal sense of efficacy'." (Song, 2009: 72) Activism and participation in virtual communities do not transfer smoothly into real life. Even more, it is not sure whether or not the type 2 audience is suffering from alienation and a sense of social and political powerlessness. These may be less visible or less studied (compared with the mass audience research tradition), because new theoretical frameworks are far behind new communication practices.

It is still uncertain if the old, mass audience concept is really outdated as an object on the horizon of the communication theory and research. Mapping of new key dimensions that can circumscribe the multitude of cross-audiences is needed both in theory and in research. For the time being, a great deal of research still keeps continuity with old audience theories and concepts. In this article, we did not have any pretension to offer a new theory. What we aimed for was a systematic comparison between the two audience prototypes, their attributes, communication practices and participation forms. We could have included additional variables and attributes that were not mentioned in the article or listed in Table 1, in order to further warn the reader about to the complexity of sailing towards a theoretical horizon of full audience participation. These variables could be: new social contexts with placeless power and powerless places; new techniques of lobbying, spinning, and bewildering of people; absence of media and computer literacy on a complete global scale; lack of presence of real "others"; fight for freedom of knowledge distribution between states and corporations, insisting on copy rights, and the active audience and civil society, asking for gift economy and creative commons... However, we hope that even without these added elements – space does not allow us to develop them – our perspective remains clear and compelling.

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