

Challenges when researching digital audiences: Mapping audience research of software designs, interfaces and platforms

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Summary:

Based on an extensive literature review, this contribution explores current and future challenges for media and communication scholars when enquiring people's engagements with digital media. Structuring the existing literature around four themes (affordances, the political economy of digital audiences, self-representation and identity, domestication and (problematic) uses of ICT), an overview of the current state of the field is provided. As such, three challenges are defined: exploring the diversity of digital audiences that now engage with digital media, allowing more room for the semiotics and contexts in which people experience digital media, and moving beyond the functionalistic uses of the concept 'affordances'.

Keywords: Media and communication studies, audiences, digital media, social media, affordances, political economy, self-representation, domestication, ICT, functionalism

Introduction

Over the last decade, a considerable number of researchers have become involved with the study of people interacting with digital media – in all kinds of ways. Remarkably, such

explorations are usually transcending far beyond the borders of what is understood as the field of media, communication and audience studies. Media, communication and audience studies are often being seen as keeping alive 'old' and 'dead' audience theories (Carpentier, 2011; Carpentier, Schröder, & Hallet, 2013), that used to work when studying media such as television, but not anymore for the 'more active' engagements with media such as sharing pictures on mobile phone applications as Snapchat. Being a spectator has become something undesirable in digital worlds; who would want to be called 'a lurker'¹ in times where everyone is seen as taking part (should!) in the active creation of his or her own media life (Deuze, 2012). Consequently, 'user' has become the dominant way to describe people interacting with digital media. The term 'user', although a valuable term, is 'entirely vague' as it can include everything (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). For example, 'a user' of digital media is often being seen as someone who rationally uses digital technology, while others question such rational uses by exploring 'user uproar' and online resistance (Brown, 2013; De Ridder, 2015). Based on an extensive literature review, this contribution makes sense of these wide and diverse approaches to study people's engagements with digital media around four themes: affordances, the political economy of digital audiences, self-representation and identity, domestication and (problematic) uses of ICT.

Digital media are often seen as simply open windows to observe people's practices and life-worlds. As such, what people are doing in digital media has become of interest to almost everyone in the social sciences and the humanities, digital media are becoming the 'open laboratory' everyone seems very excited about, which is shown in the enormous interest in so-called 'big data' research (Couldry & Powell, 2014). In this contribution we want to explore, from a media and communication studies perspective, the current and future challenges when researching digital audiences. Particularly in the context of the aforementioned challenges; a context in which audiences are called user/users, and people's practices in digital media are seen as merely mirroring everyday life. As mentioned by Sonia Livingstone and Ranjana Das (2013), media and communication studies emphasize – more than other disciplines – the importance of people's sense making practices of media texts and technologies, having a particular interest for the sometimes unexpected ways in which audiences interpret texts/technologies, and 'in turn forcing a careful examination of the particular contexts within which people engage with media' (Livingstone & Das, 2013, p. 116). To explore the research that is currently being done, this contribution has mapped an extensive amount of research that deals with audiences' interactions with and interpretations of digital media, we will refer to this as *digital audiences*. With digital media, we mean a broad collection of software designs, interfaces and platforms on any kinds of devices such as tablets, computers or smartphones.

This contribution's mapping exercise has resulted in a database of 294 peer reviewed journal articles, academic book chapters and books published in the period 2005-2015. Our search for academic peer-reviewed articles started with some general keywords and themes that we associated with designs, interfaces and platforms (such as algorithms, appropriation of software, mobile media, participation, social media, ... and so on). As the numbers of

results were overwhelming, we focused on contributions that fitted within the field of media and communication studies, the (particularly European) tradition of audience research and the more critical perspectives coming from cultural studies while excluding research done in other fields such as science and technology studies, human-computer interaction and so on. To analyse the literature, we made a thematic analysis of the abstracts of the articles, therefore using NVivo 11. Eventually, we ended up with a total of 189 different codes. Through a grounded approach, we clustered those codes into different themes. In the end, our mapping identified four larger-themes or sub-clusters that will be discussed further in the article. Within this article we will introduce a general look into our database, and while we will often refer to specific articles, they should be seen as examples to illustrate our findings and ideas. It should be mentioned that, because of the large amount of articles we collected, we will not be exhaustive, nor will we be able to pay tribute to the overwhelming diversity of research approaches and studies we found; it should be emphasized that this article will tell a particular well-informed story on how we see the challenges of researching digital audiences.

Mapping audience research on software designs, interfaces and platforms

The way digital audiences are being theorized and researched varies enormously. Not only can different approaches be found within different fields to the study of how people interpret and interact with digital media (as mentioned in the introduction, fields such as science and technology studies, human-computer interaction, etc.), but also within the cluster of media and communication studies themselves. First, it was necessary to categorize keywords associated with studies on digital media audiences. A very first categorization of dominant and recurring themes, concepts and approaches were defined inductively, based on a first collection of journal articles dealing with research on digital audiences. Gradually, we could see how the journal articles dealing with digital audiences within the field of (cultural) media and communication studies, could be categorized into four sub-clusters or larger themes:

- (1) Affordances
- (2) Political economy of digital media audiences
- (3) Self-representation and identity
- (4) Domestication and (problematic) uses of ICT

While these four categories should not be seen as mutually exclusive or exhaustive, these sub-clusters proved to be dominant themes around which research on digital audiences within (cultural) media studies and communication studies is situated; they provided useful to find more relevant journal articles on digital audiences, but they also allowed to categorize and structure our first version of the database of journal articles.



Looking at the final database of 294 collected journal articles dealing with digital audiences, a word count based on the abstracts showed how current research conceptualizes people's interactions with and interpretations of digital media as both technological (e.g. material) objects and as symbolic values (e.g. texts). The most common terms used in the collected abstracts database were 'use', while 'self' came second.² Further very common keywords (in order of most commonly found) were 'identity', 'affordances', 'people', 'audiences', 'users', 'user', 'participation', 'using', 'public', 'participants', 'communities', 'interaction' and 'personal'. While the most common keywords to describe digital audiences such as 'use' and 'self' refer to the agency of an individual self that uses a variation of designs, interfaces and platforms limited by structural features (often referred to as 'affordances'), collective nouns to describe digital audiences were much less frequently found. As noted by Sonia Livingstone (2014, p. 249), the use of a single instead of a 'collective noun' matters to understand how digital audiences are understood in current research:

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of a collective noun matters, for different terms mobilize different discourses, point to different opportunity structures, prioritize different interests.

These conceptualizations show how digital audiences are generally understood as individuals dealing with digital media technologies (thus with media *qua* objects), while not so much as a *collective* interpreting the symbolic values of digital media as an 'interpretative community', which is characterized by exploration of specific 'discursive modes of interpreting media content' (Jensen, 1990, p. 130). How these specific interpretations prioritize different interests, will be further explored by introducing the different thematic sub-clusters, and how these thematic clusters make sense of digital audiences.

Affordances

Over the last decade, the concept of 'affordances' has become prominent in media and communication studies dealing with digital and networked technologies. Understood as the 'mutuality between technological shaping and social practices of people' (Livingstone, 2008), media scholars often refer to the work of Ian Hutchby (2001, p. 44) to explain how this 'mutuality' works:

affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them.

James Gibson (1986) originally developed the concept within the field of environmental psychology, dealing with the theorization of the visual perception of the world; 'affordance originally described the way human beings and animals perceive their surroundings' (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 3). Further popularized into design studies by Don Norman (2002) in *The Design of Everyday Things*, the concept was translated to technology, media and communication studies; affordances as providing to be 'a middle ground between technological determinism and social constructionism' (ibid., p. 2). In media and communication studies, the concept of 'affordances' usually understands what 'users and their sociality get from a technology', while in technology studies 'affordances' has to 'carry a weight counterbalanced to technological determinism' (ibid., p. 2).

Research dealing with digital audiences in media and communication studies usually refers to the concept of affordances in many different contexts; for example when exploring digital media-related practices of digital audiences such as friendship, homework, identity formation, working, producing news, protesting and resisting, dating, sharing, blogging, and so on. As argued before, this research explores a myriad of socialites now taking place in online environments and therefore using technologies. However, only a small number of these studies explore what affordances actually are and how they might work related to

specific practices and people's imaginations of digital media. Questions about how the architecture of social media shape's people's practices in digital media and everyday life, explorations of different kinds of affordances, and explorations on how we should conceptualize 'affordances' in media and communication studies are only (very) scarce. As noted by Peter Nagy and Gina Neff (2015), in media and communication studies, the concept of affordances is often wrongly used as a synonym to simply describe the 'features' of a technology, or referring to 'all that is *not* [emphasis in original] the work of human users' (ibid., p. 2). This is, as they conclude, not taking seriously the materiality of technology (ibid.):

Affordance used thus, unfortunately, too often serves to separate questions of the materiality of technology from discussions of social construction and human agency, rather than to engage in materiality with any scholarly seriousness [...].

The criticism of Nagy and Neff echoes our own observations; affordances are often briefly mentioned, but not seriously researched related to specific practices and contexts in which digital media are used. We find this a striking remark, because the way media shape (or 'order') practices has been theorized as one of the central concerns for the study of audiences and broader media and communications (Couldry, 2010, 2011). Specifically, the work of US scholars danah boyd (2006, 2014) and Nancy Baym (2012) has been dealing with how social media architecture and affordances shape (young) people's social media practices. For example, according to boyd (2014, pp. 10-11), social networking sites 'encourage certain types of practices'. She defines four types of affordances; 'persistence' ('the durability of online expressions and content'), 'visibility' ('the potential audience who can bear witness'), 'spreadability' ('the ease with which content can be shared') and 'searchability' ('the ability to find content'). Although these affordances define clear ways in which people's practices are shaped by social media, it remains rather unclear, in boyd's research, how people actually interact with them, or how these affordances become meaningful in people's everyday life. Other research that defines different kind of affordances can for example be found in the work of Volker Eisenlauer (2014) who sees Facebook as a 'third author' when people produce texts. Therefore, Eisenlauer expands the idea of affordances as only being technological ('technological affordances'), to 'relational affordances', which are defined as 'the different Facebook users who draw on individual background knowledge when operating the platform' (ibid., p. 82), and 'functional affordances', which are defined as 'the communicative properties of the software service in use' (ibid., p. 79). For Eisenlauer, the 'relational affordances' are of particular importance, as they relate to the necessary competence of the *individual* user to have knowledge on how Facebook co-constructs the texts they produce on the platform. While affordances are usually related to individual uses, Lucas Graves (2007) argues affordances should be seen in *cultural contexts* and historic specificities ('historical affordances'); 'Every technological

object—certainly any communication device—takes on meaning in a cultural context, a ‘web of significance’ that itself is altered by the reading’ (ibid., p. 337). As a last example, as argued by Iben Have and Birgitte Perdersen (2013), affordances could be seen as a methodological tool to explore mediatization processes; how media change social and cultural aspects of everyday life (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). To them, exploring ‘affordances’ (used in plural) should be done in a specific *context of a medium*; ‘it makes more sense to use the more dynamic and, in our sense, context-specific term affordances in the plural rather by studying the affordances of a specific medium, one also studies the micro-logics of the medium’ (ibid., p. 129-130). Further, they describe a specific relation of the term affordances to actual uses of the medium; ‘The term affordance also inscribes possibilities of the media not yet actualised by users and producers’ (ibid., p. 130). Thereby, they emphasize the material capacities of media, rather than how digital audiences engage with media. While affordances has become an important concept to theorize digital audiences and their relationships to technology, the concept does not always relate to actual uses of media.

Political economy of digital media audiences

Within media and communication studies, political economy explorations of digital media audiences have been particularly well developed by scholars such as Mark Andrejevic (2004, 2011), Nico Carpentier (2009, 2011) and Christian Fuchs (2011, 2012). These critical views on being a digital audience usually refer to concepts from Marxist theory such as (audience) labour, digital media industries, commodification, (capital) accumulation, alienation, exploitation, struggle, surveillance, privacy and so on. Further, research on the political economy of digital audiences relates to a number of fields and approaches going from anthropology, cultural studies and sociology, to the study of economic relations structuring digital media, analysing historical contexts, and the study of technologies. Challenging popular ideas that discursively construct the Web 2.0 as a collection of accessible and neutral spaces for unseen audience activity, referred to as ‘user-generated-content’, is at the core of this critical project. It questions how digital audiences are often automatically seen as (more) ‘active’ than in traditional media. Moreover, this perspective questions how ‘participation’ in digital media is often being seen as automatically (more) ‘democratic’. Critical political economy understands the one that produces content as providing ‘immaterial labour’; a concept defined by Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) and adopted in media and communication studies to think critically about how users become labourers for commercially-driven Internet platforms (Terranova, 2000) when they are ‘clicking’, ‘Googling’ or being ‘social’.

Within the political economy tradition, there have been a lot of theoretical mappings and conceptualizations on digital audiences and commodification processes. Further, there is a considerable focus on deconstructing how digital media industries and society makes sense of the ‘user’, particularly on exposing the limited user’s agency in digital media (van Dijck, 2009). For example, Hyunjin Kang and Matthew McAllister explore the assertions of

political economy scholars that deal with the 'commodification of the audience', related to Google's revenues. Exploring the concept of audience commodification as proposed by Dallas Smythe (1981), Smythe's arguments were made before the emergence of digital media such as search engines and social media tools, the authors argue how in times of Google the user commodification process is more intensive and precise than ever (*ibid.*, p. 151). Smythe's notion of 'audience commodification' has been further theoretically approached to debate 'corporate Internet services' exploitation of digital labour' by Christian Fuchs (2012), but also to debate the increasing importance of 'mobile devices' that now dominate the Internet sphere (Manzerolle, 2010).

Theoretical and conceptual political economy explorations that deal critically with being a digital audience have provided much insight on the revenue models of digital media industries. Moreover, such theoretical reflections were – and are – very necessary, as new technologies have radically transformed the condition of being a media audience/consumer/user (Napoli, 2011), particularly related to the monitoring that takes place when using such technologies, bringing forward important issues related to privacy and surveillance of digital audiences (Andrejevic, 2007). However, from a more audience-centred perspective that focuses on how people interact with and interpret digital media in their everyday lives, political economy's critical conceptualizations and insights deserve to be more regularly completed or confronted with how digital audiences *themselves* make sense of these critical conceptualizations. For example, Brian Brown (2013) argues that it is important to recognize the exploitation of digital audiences, while it is equally important to recognize the many instances of 'user uproar' or resistance to many aspects of digital labour. Brown describes how people actively resist the violation of their privacy when they are using digital media. He makes these arguments based on interviews with members of the photo-sharing website Flickr.com. Involving the audience when research the political economy of digital media industries, as Brown argues, 'opens up new cognitive spaces for the privacy debate'.

Self-representation and online identity

Self-representation and online identity have been central to the study of digital audiences. Giving shape to an 'online identity' by using a variety of semiotic tools for 'self-representation' is one of the main activities of audiences in the digital media sphere. When the studies on online audiences first appeared, research explored identity in anonymous and disembodied communication environments (often playful environments such as games), arguing how an online (or virtual) identity was a continuous 'fluid' experiment 'under construction'. With the emergence of homepages, blogging and the enormous popularity of 'social' web 2.0 applications, such as social networking sites, online identity has been understood as much more co-constructed or shaped by online *and* offline normative social and cultural contexts, but also through the technology that is used (e.g. a particular platform such as Facebook); indeed, when talking about 'self-representation' and 'online identity'; the concept 'affordance' (see *supra*) is of primary importance. Often,

research explores the different functions of digital media that allow, stimulate, control self-representations and identity formation; this research is mostly related to young people and adolescents. For example, Patty Valkenburg and Jochen Peter (2011) argue how ‘anonymity’, ‘asynchronicity’ and ‘accessibility’ are key features (or affordances) of the Internet that stimulate self-representation, ultimately affecting adolescents’ psychological development and identity formation. An interest in the (psychological) development of young people’s social identities in the context of digital media led to different conceptualizations that are useful to describe the performative nature of identity formation when using digital media. For example, it has been shown that digital media allow people to very actively ‘manage impressions’ (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006) and perform ‘hoped for possible selves’, but also highly ‘idealized’ versions of selves (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008).

Other than dealing with how young people’s personal identities develop related to digital media practices, social and cultural aspects of identities are equally central to the study digital media. To theorize and research social identity aspects of digital media, the work of symbolic interactionist sociologist Erving Goffman (1959), particularly *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, has been adopted as the dominant framework to study social identity aspects of digital audiences. As noted by Liam Bullingham and Ana Vasconcelos (2013, p. 110), the Goffmanian perspective is useful to study online interactions of people:

Equally, the online environment, with its enhanced potential for editing the self, can offer opportunities to contribute to further developing the Goffman framework, namely, by suggesting that there are different gradations in editing the self and in its resulting manifestations and by exploring the boundary and grey areas between persona adoption and more pronounced editing of self.

Much attention has been devoted specifically to ‘gender’ as a category for analysis when researching social and cultural aspects of digital audiences. While gender differences in self-representations have been a much-explored topic, critical studies that rely on poststructuralist insights on the repetitive performativity nature of gender identities in social media have also been a prominent theme. Other themes are how self-representations reflect ‘gendered stereotypes’ (Sveningsson, 2007), while also exploring traces of an increased ‘female self-objectification’ in digital media; meaning that (usually young) girls objectify themselves, as sexual objects, especially in social media self-representations (Ringrose, 2011). Interestingly, while this research explores the activity of digital audiences, they often refer to how these self-representations in social media are subjected to sexualized images from popular mass cultural products such as advertisements, as argued in research exploring self-representations on the social networking site Fotolog in Spain:

These categories – originally defined in the analysis of advertising messages –

are equally useful to explain some adolescent practices on Fotolog, which not only shows that self-presentations on SNS fit longer-standing gender stereotypes. (Tortajada-Giménez, Araüna-Baró, & Martínez, 2013, p. 185)

Other cultural aspects of identities are studied as well. Attention is given to sexual identities, such as research on 'queer identities', on how ethnic minorities deal with their self-representations in social media, but also studies on how Christian youths represent themselves, and how Muslim identities are constructed in online environments.

Domestication and (problematic) uses of ICT

Domestication has been on the agenda in media and communication studies, and particularly in the study of audiences since the early 1990's. While the domestication approach has been related to television by well-known media scholars such as David Morley and Roger Silverstone (Morley & Silverstone, 1990), 'domestication' has been high on the agenda when information and communication technologies (ICT's) started to emerge, as explained by Leslie Haddon (2011, p. 312):

The framework that emerged considered the processes shaping the adoption and use of ICTs, but in so doing also asked what the technologies and services mean to people, how they experience ICTs, and the roles that these technologies can come to play in their lives. In fact, the term 'domestication' itself evoked a sense of 'taming the wild,' and we see in many domestication studies the processes at work as people, both individually and especially in households, encounter ICTs and deal with them, sometimes rejecting the technologies, at other times working out how exactly to fit them into their everyday routines.

The domestication approach focuses on media consumption and the appropriation of technologies in the everyday lives of people, examining the 'social' uses of media, particularly related to power relations such as gender disparities in the home, structuring uses of media and ICT. The interest in the gendered domestication of the computer and the Internet is a prominent example hereof (van Zoonen, 2002). Recently, domestication research on digital audiences has focused on a myriad of digital media technologies and platforms such as games, social networking sites, search engines and mobile phones. Many social and cultural contexts of digital media audiences have been explored in this area of research, such as for example a focus on intergenerational differences, socio-economic factors relating to a 'digital divide' and so on. A well-developed approach to the domestication of the Internet has been referred to as investigations on the 'Internet and the everyday life', developed mainly in the work *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life* by Maria Bakardjieva (2005). Research focuses for example on exploring how searching Google has become a routine in everyday life that shapes our knowledge (Schroeder, 2014),

but also how the mobile phone affects the everyday planning of families with children (Hjorthol, 2008).

More general perspectives on the uses of digital technologies focus on the specific motives and gratifications when people use digital media, but also specific problematic uses, such as cyberbullying, and the uses of the Internet for 'risky' activities (mostly for young people and children), or the use of the Internet to spread hateful messages. Gratifications focus on the individual needs of why people consume media. As the uses and gratifications approach in media and communication studies has been developed by Elihu Katz in 1959, recent research on digital audiences felt the need to update this perspective to understand new and emerging media (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). The uses and gratifications perspectives however, has been proven valuable for several studies on for example bloggers motivations to produce content (Sepp, Liljander, & Gummerus, 2011), to evaluate how people 'experience' Facebook (Orchard, Fullwood, Morris, & Galbraith, 2015), and the motivations for young people to use social networking sites (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010).

Defining challenges

As we previously explored in the four larger themes we identified (affordances, political economy of digital media audiences, self-representation and identity, domestication and (problematic) uses of ICT), a large variety of research on digital audiences has been done in the last decade. As the digital has grown up, now being indistinguishable from a contemporary media life, some challenges for the future study of (digital) audiences are emerging. We will now explore some of these general challenges based on what we have noticed in our review of our collection of literature dealing with digital audiences.

Most evidently, as digital media has grown up, audience researchers should take notice of the observation that they have been dealing mostly with exploring *young people's* practices, identities and cultures related to the use of digital media, and social media platforms such as social networking sites in particular. As social media platforms have been massively adopted in Western life-worlds, they quickly became essential tools for 'being cool at school' (boyd, 2007, p. 119); digital and social media have been too narrowly framed as something exclusively from youth culture. As society (parents, educators, politicians ...) worried about what young people were doing while spending so much time online (who is there to control them?), most research is focussing on how we could better understand online risks and opportunities, and how digital media is affecting young people's social psychological development (see particularly the contribution on 'invisible audiences' of Kaun et al. in this volume). While there will be a continued need for such explorations, we know little on the elderly's experiences of digital media, how young parents organise life with digital media, how people experience illness with digital media, how very young children deal with digital media, and so on. As digital media have grown up, it has indeed become a part of *all people's* lives, for better or for worse.

A second observation is the already mentioned dominance of the concept 'user', often singular, to describe digital media audiences. As we have mentioned earlier; such specific semantic choices prioritize different interests. Digital media audiences are seen as individuals, and not so much as collectives using media (Livingstone, 2014). Describing digital media audiences as users is often linked to a focus on the affordances of digital media, or an interest in how people's practices are structured by – or on the contrary, resist – certain material aspects of digital technology. A challenge for the study of digital audiences is not to prioritize media as only being material objects, but to allow more room for the semiotics and contexts in which people (as individuals or groups) experience digital media (see also Livingstone & Das, 2013). As we have shown, there is a thriving tradition researching the domestication of ICTs; while such a tradition is attentive to the particular contexts in which people experience digital media, contexts should equally be taken into account while focussing on affordances, the political economy of digital media, or when dealing with self-representations and identities. Other than taking into account the contexts, involving the semiotic aspects when studying digital media audiences should be taken up as a challenge as well. The focus on 'user' often prioritizes digital media audiences as active producers, while not seeing them as readers that interpret media content when they are online:

However, paradoxically, when user, producer and audience become more conflated, the user-component dominates the chain of equivalence, and all audiences become articulated as passive participants. This, in turn, renders passive consumption either absent or regrettable; a process that explains why there are so few reception studies of online content. (Carpentier et al., 2013, p. 4)

The lack of reception studies of online content mentioned by Nico Carpentier et al. has been clearly observed in our database as well. For example, when research enquires self-representations on popular social media websites (mostly young people's self-representations), results are presented as if those self-representations are clear windows to people's identities and life-worlds. Sexy pictures in social media are seen as proofs of how people (mostly young girls) take part in their own sexualisation and self-objectification. However, it should be clear that such conclusions focus on implied rather than empirical readings (Livingstone & Das, 2013). Such readings ignore that these conclusions say nothing about digital audiences' actual interpretations. As such, more reception studies on digital media could contextualize how digital audiences themselves make sense of such sexy self-representations: can such pictures not be read as an ironic playfulness within the context of a highly sexualized culture?

As a last challenge for the study of digital audiences, we would like to discuss how media and communication studies use the concept of 'affordances'. As we have mentioned before, the notion of affordances is central to the study of digital audiences, not only in

media and communication studies, but also in other disciplines among which science and technology studies, human-computer interaction, education studies, and so on. However, from an audience studies perspective, which has traditionally been focussing more on the complex interpretations of audiences (of texts and technologies), and the contexts in which people are involved with media, the way in which ‘affordances’ is used in digital audience studies often resembles functionalist theories such as the uses and gratifications approach. Affordances are often described as some kind of features of technologies that are actively and rationally used by people. As such, people’s practices are seen as afforded by the technology around them (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 2). Although such functionalist reasoning on how people make sense of media in their everyday lives have been criticized in the 1980s (then dealing with media as texts and not so much as technologies), when cultural studies entered the field of audience studies, we observed how such arguments are again dominant today. As Adrienna Shaw (2015) notes, the relevance of Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model is still valid here to explore the power dimensions of technologies related to people’s uses. Shaw notes how affordances could be used in dominant/hegemonic ways, oppositional ways and negotiated ways; particular uses may depend on different subject positions. This idea provides a more in-depth exploration of the power dynamics of affordances, exploring who has the power to define how technologies should be used. Currently, affordances are used in rather ‘rigid’ and ‘fixed’ ways. Therefore, Nagy and Neff argue we should see affordances not only as being actually ‘there’, but as imagined entities that become meaningful to people in all kinds of ways. Imagined affordances could be a way out of the functionalistic interpretation of ‘affordances’ currently dominant in the study of digital audiences:

Imagined affordances emerge between users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers. With imagined affordances, we try to bring together the various ways of theorizing affordance to create a concept flexible and robust enough for the complex emerging socio-technical relationships in social life. (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 5)

Toward non-functionalistic research on digital audiences

Imagined affordances are one way out of the functionalistic approaches to digital audiences we often observed. The most recurring keywords in our database such as ‘user/s’, ‘affordances’, and themes such as ‘the political economy of digital audiences’, ‘self-representation’, ‘online identity’, ‘domestication’ and ‘problematic uses of ICT’ all seem pertinent. However, as noted by Livingstone and Das (2013, p. 118), we should not fall in the trap of repeating old mistakes: the useful legacy of audience and reception studies seems to have slipped one’s mind. Often, we see a lack of a social and cultural contextualisation of digital audiences’ activities related to the use of software designs, interfaces or platforms. Second, we see a lack of empirical research that shows how digital

audiences interpret/use/consume/imagine/... (in sometimes unexpected ways, or maybe not) digital technologies *and* texts. Third, we see a lack of research on digital audiences that carefully deconstructs the myth as if digital media are merely windows to people's social life-worlds.

Looking back at 'older' audience theories could be a useful inspiration therefore. As Nico Carpentier (2011, p. 207) has noted before:

Audience theory turns out to be quite stable in its capacity to facilitate the understanding of the diversity of relations between humans and media technology. The core theoretical dimensions that structure audience theory have not been downgraded by rise of the digital culture [...].

Media and communication studies should, more than any other discipline that is currently being interested in what people are doing with digital media, be aware of its history and the long-standing theories of media, audiences and participation. Think about the work of Raymond Williams (2003) on 'Television' and how he argues technologies are both shaped by and shaping social structures and cultural forms, or how media have a double articulation in which media as objects/technologies/institutions, cannot be separated from media as texts and symbolic forms (Silverstone, 1994). An interest in these complex power dynamics has always been at the heart of audience theories; with *digital audiences* now grown up, probably for some more time to come. The structural powers coming from large digital media companies (such as the dominant platform providers like Facebook and Twitter) and State security interests to monitor citizens, are leading to an increasingly 'closed, market-led, heavily monitored online ecosystem' (Horton, 2016); such power dynamics are having very real consequences for everyday users that need to be urgently addressed. Further, next to these structural power dynamics, the digital is a space where continuous symbolic struggles unfold that are still very much related to the same old social stratifications such as gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality; digital media have just become another framework for understanding the world, which is still in need for thorough deconstruction.

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Notes:

¹ A lurker is a member of an online community who follows the forum or social media profiles of others, but does not post.

² It should be mentioned that we only focus on the terms that are related to how current research conceptualizes people's interactions with and interpretations of digital media. As can be seen in **Figure 1**, the most recurring words before 'use' are very general terms: 'media', 'social', 'online' and 'communication'.

³ The reference list consists of references used (by quotes or paraphrases) in this article, but it does not represent the entire database that we have analysed.