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The participation paradigm in audience research

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Abstract

As today's media simultaneously converge and diverge, fusing and hybridising across digital services and platforms, some researchers argue that audiences are dead – long live the user! But for others, it is the complex interweaving of continuities and changes that demands attention, especially now that audiencing has become a vital mode of engaging with all dimensions of daily life. This article asks how we should research audiences in a digital networked age. I argue that, while many avenues are being actively pursued, many researchers are concentrating on the notion of participation, asking, on the one hand, what modes of participation are afforded to people by the particular media and communication infrastructures which mediate social, cultural or political spheres of life? And, on the other hand, how do people engage with, accede to, negotiate or contest this as they explore and invent new ways of connecting with each other through and around media? The features of this emerging participation paradigm of audience research are examined in this article.

The entangled narratives of audiences and audience research

The history of audience research has been told in many ways. For Lowery and DeFleur (1983), each generation of researchers produced a yet more sophisticated theory, beginning with the Payne Studies of film audiences over eighty years ago, and adding to knowledge ever since (as signalled by their title, *Milestones...*). For others, theory is not so independent of its circumstances: Katz (1980) sees twentieth century researchers' oscillation between theories of active and passive audiences as a response to the historical conditions that shaped both audiences and audience research (including World War II, the post-war consumer boom, globalisation). Taking a longer view, Butsch (2000) regards the past half century's fascination with agency and class in relation to the television audience as the latest chapter in the history of

print readership, theatre and music hall audiences and diverse other collectivities of viewers, listeners, and crowds. In the twenty-first century, audiences and therefore audience research are changing still further.

As today's media simultaneously converge and diverge, fusing and hybridising across digital services and platforms, some researchers argue that audiences are dead – long live the user! (Rosen, 2006, although see Jermyn & Holmes, 2006). But for others, it is the complex interweaving of continuities and changes that demands attention. It is argued that audiences are now 'everywhere and nowhere' (Bird, 2003: 3), that everything is mediated (Livingstone, 2009b; see also Silverstone, 2005) or mediatized (Hepp, 2013), so that 'audiencing' (Fiske, 1992) as verb (or process) more than as noun (or discrete entity) has become a vital mode of engaging with the world. Where once people moved in and out of their status as audiences, using media for specific purposes and then doing something else, being someone else, in our present age of continual immersion in media, we are now continually and unavoidably audiences at the same time as being consumers, relatives, workers and – fascinating to many – citizens and publics. A quotation from the founder of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies illustrates the change:

'Most contemporary popular entertainment encourages an effete attitude to life, *but still much of life has little direct connexion with it*. There are wars and fears of war; there is the world of work, of the relations, the loyalties and tensions there; there are the duties of home and the management of money; there are neighbourhood ties and demands; there are illness and fatigue and birth and death; there is all the world of local recreation' (Hoggart, 1957: 324, italics added).

Half a century later it is hard to identify a sphere of life that has no direct connection with the media, although this connection varies in nature, strength and importance. The idea and practice of war is now significantly mediated; social relations are shaped by the values, aspirations and conventions made familiar through popular television; the duties of home and the management of money are subject to a barrage of advice and lifestyle programming; local ties are supplemented by electronically-mediated ties which easily transcend the neighbourhood; public understanding of illness, birth and death is framed by the discourses of mediated expertise; and the world of local recreation takes place in the cinema, the video arcade, the cybercafé, and the 'big screen' pub.

So, how should we research audiences in a digital networked age? Can we do it without repeating old mistakes - for example, extending the much-disputed celebration of audience agency to embrace an equally problematic assumption of user agency or, as in the contrary position, making the technologically determinist assumption that users' interpretations can be presumed from a knowledge of the digital text or technology alone? Are we clear-sighted about what is different in the 'digital age', especially compared with the audiovisual age in which theories of audience reception and ethnography were developed? And, when considerable effort on the part of governments, industry, civil society and publics is being devoted to harnessing digital media to enable democratic information, deliberation and participation, can we afford to be as negative about the media as Hoggart was?

In this article, I examine the growing interest among audience researchers in how the changing media and communication environment enables or impedes participation in society. Not only does this open a fruitful dialogue with theorists of democracy, civic culture or civil society, who have long been interested in the conditions of mediation but, I suggest, it represents a new 'paradigm' for audience research. Here I build on Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) provocative comparison between: first, the 'behavioural paradigm', encompassing Katz'

oscillation between ‘media effects’ and ‘uses and gratifications’ research; second, the more recent tradition of audience reception and media, which they term the ‘incorporation/resistance paradigm’, typified by work following Hall’s (1980) paper on Encoding/Decoding; and third, their ‘spectator/performance paradigm’ which, born out of late or post-modern social theory, examines how people constantly perform ‘if being they are being looked at, as if they are at the centre of the attention of a real or imaginary audience’ (p.89), as exemplified by the explosion of reality shows that dominate prime time television.

Developments in audiences and in audience research are often though not necessarily intertwined. Doubtless the behavioural approach became prominent with the rise of powerful media corporations. The success of cultural studies may stem from the increasing affluence but also inequality threatening the societal consensus linked to the post-war consumer boom. The postmodern turn (see the spectator/performance paradigm) not only influenced audience studies but also reshaped audiences themselves - consider processes of format franchising, content branding, lifestyle marketing and the experience economy. Thus it is thought-provoking to consider why, now, participation has come to the foreground – both in audience research but also, more significantly, in relation to audiences themselves. Indeed, while acknowledging that the metaphor of the paradigm is flawed (audience research hardly has the status of quantum or even Newtonian physics), I do wish to recognise the scale and significance of our present focus on *participation*.

This stems less from developments in theory than from the repositioning of audiences in society. Audiences are no longer sequestered in the disconnected domain of private domesticity and leisure (if ever they were). Rather, today’s media environment is reshaping the opportunity structures by which people (as audiences and as mediated publics) can participate in an increasingly mediatized society. Many people – though not all, and not equally – are taking up these opportunities, with more chat, messages, networking, sharing and collaboration than ever before in human history. It seems incumbent on audience researchers, then, to join forces with researchers and practitioners with expertise in the theory and management of participation to ask whether any of this matters. As audience researchers respond, deepening their interest in the contemporary challenges of participation (participation in what, how, in whose interest, and with what consequences?) they find themselves following another trend ‘out there’ in the world: the call on intellectuals not merely to understand the world but also to change it – in this case, to contribute what they know of media and media audiences so as to encourage more participation, less exclusion, and more responsive civic institutions.

The ‘Participation Paradigm’

Grammatically speaking, ‘participation’ is the nominalization of the verb, ‘to participate’, meaning to take part in something. It is important to identify what that something is: one does not participate, or seek to increase participation, merely for the sake of it. Moreover, participation is never a wholly individual act, and it always advances certain interests. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ‘participation’ as ‘the state of being related to a larger whole’; the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as: ‘the process or fact of sharing in an action, sentiment, etc.; (now esp.) active involvement in a matter or event, esp. one in which the outcome directly affects those taking part.’ So, if the present paradigm for audience research centres on participation, we must ask – participation in what? Not, surely, participation in an audience *per se* but, rather, participation in culture or community or civil society or democracy.

The concept of participation does double duty for audience researchers (Dahlgren, 2012). By emphasising that audiences may take part in something larger than themselves, the concept of the participatory audience is more social than that of the ‘active’ audience, a concept developed in the heyday of structuralist accounts of inscribed readers to critique their neglect of real-life audiences. To be sure, audiences have always and necessarily been active, for otherwise no textual interpretations could ever be actualised. Further, the advent of digital media does not, retrospectively, render audiences passive. But there are now new possibilities for action, interaction and participation (Carpentier, 2012), and these take audience researchers beyond the ‘so what?’ question that has bedevilled ‘active audience’ research in the past.

In mapping the complex interdependencies between audiences and publics (Livingstone, 2005), I argued that the challenge was not only to understand (or debate) their mutual relations but also to recognize that both are changing – historically and conceptually. Interestingly, while there surely remain many ways in which people engage with media that need not, or even could not, be analysed in terms of participation, the reverse is less and less true. A crucial change (albeit evolutionary more than revolutionary) is underway: the processes of participation (and, more widely, of democracy) are increasingly shaped by modern digital networked media. However, not all audiences participate, and not all participation is mediated. But increasingly these intersect: audiences are becoming more participatory, and participation is ever more mediated. Arguably, commerce primarily drives the former process while the state and civil society are driving the latter. Intriguingly, academics appear to some degree as cheerleaders for both – by working to enable the use of social media platforms for civic engagement, for instance; moreover, though they are often pessimistic about the outcome of participatory initiatives, they rarely argue that such efforts should not be attempted.

Herein lies the second contribution of the participation paradigm to audience research, for the focus on participation brings with it a normative agenda. People *act* in all kinds of ways, for better or for worse, and generally society considers that a matter of individual freedom. But when people *participate* in something, society tends to judge whether such participation is beneficial to the participants and/or the wider public, and it may provide public funding or other institutional support. Where actions may enable negative freedoms, in Berlin’s (1958) terms (i.e. society intervenes only if the rights of others are infringed), participation represents a positive freedom. We may even devote public funds to enable certain types of participation, and we are tempted to prevent others, such as racist demonstrations, or obscene shows, even if no individual harm is done, because they offend society at large.

In the academy, the normative turn is evident in impatience with sophisticated theorisation of unclear relevance to pressing social problems outside the ivory tower (Nyre, 2009). In the media and communication ecology, with technologies, organisations, regulation and networks in flux, the result has been a call, seemingly churlish to reject, for academy to sit on advisory bodies or provide evidence-based policy. In society, the importance of participation, along with the public’s desire to participate, may be no greater than before, but there is certainly heightened visibility for the participation agenda, with significant consequences for the mediation of ‘opportunity structures’ (Cammaerts, 2012) or ‘participant structures’ (Spitulnik, 2010). This has been stimulated by the availability of new tools and platforms for expression and deliberation, though it is also striking that public, private and third sector institutions have all responded with vigour, reorienting themselves to a newly-visible public, developing consumer-facing strategies and social media platforms. The idea of participation has become a compelling topic for public attention, resulting in a clamour of reflexive questioning - is there enough participation in society, should institutions be more participatory, are young people too apathetic, who’s listening to citizens’ voices, whose voices are going unheard, and what should be done about it?

In recent years, then, many audience researchers have joined forces with those interested in wider questions of social and political participation. What do we bring to the table? The recognition that, as the media environment becomes the infrastructure for all spheres of social life, in order to participate in society people must engage with the media; and to enhance the process and outcomes of participation, society must deal with the potential and pitfalls of publics also being audiences (see, for instance, work on the pre-public, proto-public, civic and political roles variously adopted by audiences; Bennett, 2008; Carpentier, 2012; Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2010; Dahlgren, 2012). Significantly, processes of mediation, including the mediation of participation, are neither fleeting nor infinitely flexible. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) define digital media infrastructure in terms of the *artifacts* (technologies, texts), *activities* (practices of engagement), and social *arrangements* (institutional structures, organization and governance) by which mediated communication underpins diverse spheres of society). This has implications for the opportunity structures open to the public *qua* audiences in a mediated society. As Ito (2009: 14) observes, we are witnessing the emergence of new kinds of participation genres, new ways in which ‘culture gets embodied and ‘hardened’ into certain conventionalized styles of representation, practice, and institutional structure that become difficult to dislodge’. Genres of participation specify particular but recognisable social and semiotic conventions for generating, interpreting and engaging with embedded practices with and through media (Livingstone & Lunt, in press), and these are in part structured top-down – for example, Dufrasne and Patriarche (2011) show that institutional visions of participatory genres shape public policy-making by creating or restricting organizational structures for citizen engagement.

Conclusion

For media and communication scholars, participation – always a vital problematic for sociology and political science – has now become also a vital problematic for us. Participation is now mediated. The subjects of everyday media (i.e. audiences) are also participants in whatever is, now, mediated: society, democracy, culture. Given the mediation (or increasing mediatisation; Hepp, 2013) of everything, we should ask not only, ‘what is the audience?’ but also ‘when it is useful and interesting to refer to people as audiences?’ The answer must be: whenever the textual or technological dimension of communication is in some way important to the unfolding action - whenever the symbolic, representational or cultural aspect of a situation is complex or its power influential or its strategy or purposes contested; in short, whenever the management of meaning is critical to the interests at stake.

Also crucial is the fact that audiences are collectivities, more than mere aggregates of individuals but distinct (though overlapping) with other collectivities – most notably, the market, nation, public. Collectivities raise questions of social roles and relations in society; they have properties at social/cultural as well as individual level; and they are planned for, designed into, regulated and anticipated by socio-technical environments. Thus they have a particular if often unpredictable power. As both individuals and collectivities, audiences engage with all spheres of society (family, politics, work, education) while they are themselves shaped by both by their engagement with those spheres and by the cultural, institutional and political-economic practices of media institutions. So, audiences have a collective social reality of significance to many or even all social spheres. They play a key interpretative role in the circuit of culture (Johnson, 1986). And they embrace diverse media – long interconnected through everyday practices, now also connected through technological convergence. Last, an audience perspective includes the phenomenological – recognising the experience of living in a mediated society, and this leads to

an insistence on the empirical, since inquiring into people's everyday lives reveals how they can surprise, resist or contradict expectations.

It seems that that audience research is emerging from a prolonged focus on the sequestration of the private domain of family life, social relations and leisure from the public (civil, political and institutional) domain. First radio and then television were appropriated primarily as domestic media (Spigel, 1992), at least in advanced western democracies (for in developing countries, they have often been community rather than individual possessions). In the middle decades of the twentieth century – a formative period for audience research – audiences sat at home on the sofa, watching television after work, arguing with family and friends; but then they turned off the television and did something else. Audiencing was privatized, contained and – until broken up by the diversification of channels and recording devices – largely organized by national broadcast schedules (Scannell, 1988). No wonder that the participatory audience was little examined, and even the idea of the active audience – which variously interprets (and talks about) whatever is on the screen – seemed counter-intuitive. But in the longer history of media (including writing and then print en route to the internet) and in the even longer history of audiences (stretching back to theatres, concerts, circuses and story-telling), this domestic moment of 'family television' (Morley, 1986) must be recognized for its historical particularity, distinct from the diverse, dispersed and sometimes participatory practices typical of other media before and since (Livingstone, 2009a).

Does each paradigm replace the previous one, as knowledge progresses? Hardly. Those in audience reception and cultural studies like to characterise the behavioural paradigm as long past; but a simple glance through the main journals in media and communication, especially in the US, Asia, and parts of Northern Europe reveals that this is far from the case. Meanwhile, those in the behavioural paradigm tend to tell an unbroken story of progress that finds it convenient to relegate developments in reception studies to the supposedly-separate field of cultural studies. The influence of cultural studies is also far from over, though its politics have become internally as well as externally contested. The fate or fortune of the spectator/performance paradigm is less clear: on the one hand, the postmodern play of diffused identities and narcissistic pleasures generated considerable frustration among scholars, especially for its uncertain theory of power? On the other hand, its conception of audiences as everywhere and nowhere, and its emphasis on performance and practice has proved apt in our effort to understand the age of user-generated content (consider YouTube's strapline as an obvious example – 'Broadcast yourself'), even though this hardly displaces the importance of ideology, resistance or even media effects.

In short, notwithstanding the conciliatory hopes of some (e.g. Blumler, Gurevitch, & Katz, 1985), the different paradigms of audience research remain distinct and useful. Each raises particular questions, each instantiates a different conception of power, and each conjures a different vision of the audience – as an aggregate of individual consumers, as social collectives stratified by class, generation, gender, etc., or as individualised but not individual performers socially constituted through the shared performance of self. Arguably all paradigms continue to coexist because all roles for the audience coexist – could one even expect to settle on a single all-encompassing view of people's mediated relation to the social? However, our new task is to understand the changing conditions of communication that, necessarily, underpin any and every form of participation (whether in oral, mass or networked society; Jensen, 2009), thus focusing on a vision of audience as public. The questions are, on the one hand, what modes of participation are afforded to people by the particular media and communication infrastructures which mediate social, cultural or political spheres of life? And, on the other hand, how do people engage with, accede to, negotiate or contest this as they explore and invent new ways of connecting with each other through and around media?

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