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Active audiences?: the debate progresses but it is far from resolved

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Active audiences? The debate progresses but is far from resolved

The study of media audiences has long been hotly contested, reflecting an intellectual history of academic oscillation (Katz, 1980) regarding their supposed power – to construct shared meanings (as debated by semiotic and reception approaches to media culture), to mitigate or moderate media influences (as debated by media effects research) or to complete or resist the circuit of culture (as debated by cultural studies and political economy theories). While Elihu Katz locates the oscillation between theories of powerless or powerful audiences in the twentieth century's twists and turns of authoritarian versus democratizing political regimes, respectively, recent decades have seen a further shift in the academy as the ontological status of the audience shifted from the singular object of realist scrutiny 'out there' towards the plural and even fugitive (Bratich, 2005) or fictional (Hartley, 1987) or discursive constructions (Ang, 1990) of late modern or postmodern social theory. Equally radical in its way, the study of audiences is now being transformed by the transformation of the mediascape itself – from one dominated by national mass broadcasting and the press, albeit tactically undercut by the vital current of interpersonal communication flowing through the lifeworld – to the mediation and digitalization of everything, with simultaneously convergent and divergent, and centrifugal and centripetal consequences, on an increasingly global scale.

The notion of 'Transforming audiences, transforming societies' (itself the title of a lively European network that has recently renewed audience research) captures the agenda facing us in late modernity: more globalized, more commodified, more connected (and, thus, potentially more participatory yet simultaneously more surveilled). Efforts to understand and manage these changes are resulting often contested, sometimes mutually contradictory claims about the nature and significance of media audiences, stemming from within but also far beyond the academy. Audiences, it is said, "are everywhere and nowhere" (Bird, 2003: 3). Audiences are dead (Jermyn & Holmes, 2006) or more alive than ever, albeit now 'the people formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2006). Audiences offer uncertain profits though they are ever more desperately sought by media industries (Ang, 1990; Bolin, 2010). Audiences are politically lightweight yet ever more is spent on political campaigning budgets. Audiences are politically apathetic yet every state regime under pressure seeks first and foremost to control what they can access. Audiences were long derided for their collective status (as crowd or mass) but are now equally derided for their individualized and instrumentalized status (as user or consumer).

One might think all this would make audience research interesting. Yet despite a quarter century or more of debate over – put simply - audience activity or passivity, many communication researchers seem as ready as ever to take them for granted as an invisible and indivisible mass, often not even according them an index entry in books claiming comprehensive coverage of media in country X or media representations of Y or the mediation of societal phenomenon Z. Implied audiences lurk behind a host of homogenizing synonyms (market, public, users, citizens, people) and nominalized processes (diffusion, adoption, culture, practice, mediation, identity, change) that mask their agency, diversity, life contexts and interests at stake. Indeed, as Jack Bratich (2005: 261) put it, 'the audience is everywhere being studied, but rarely named as such.'

When the omission of direct consideration of audiences (arguably, their symbolic annihilation; Tuchman, 1979) is pointed out to media and communication researchers, the response is often a wry acknowledgement of lack. To be sure, audiences matter, colleagues concur, but they remain positioned at the end of Harold Lasswell's (1948) famously linear process of communication ("who says what through which channel to whom with what effect?"). Even though supposedly our field has moved on from simple linear conceptions (Carey, 1975), attention to audiences can seemingly be perpetually postponed without criticism. Worse for the audience researcher who charges colleagues with neglecting audiences, however, is the receipt of a puzzled frown or dismissive glance: how, the challenge is returned to us, can the study of audiences contribute to or qualify or reframe the study of such important phenomena as political communication or political economy, governance and regulation, or cultural practice?

At least the wryly-regretful group is familiar with the now-received wisdom (among segments of our field) on why audiences matter (Livingstone, 2012), established following the enthusiastic response to Stuart Hall's (1980: 131) claim that "a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research … may be opening up" in his seminal Encoding/Decoding paper. Specifically, in relation to claims about media representations, the study of audience reception has challenged the authority of elite textual analysts to conjure up visions of model or implied, imagined or inscribed readers without thinking to check whether actual readers are obediently falling into line with 'audience conjectures' (Stromer-Galley and Schiappa, 1998: 27). In relation to top-down claims about the political economy of communication, the study of audiences-in-context it revealed the everyday micro-tactics of appropriation that reshape and remediate media forms and goods, forcing academic recognition of marginalized voices, unexpected experiences and the importance of the lifeworld in the circuit of culture (Hall, 1980). In relation to dominant theories of media imperialism, the study of audiences took this challenge to a global level, revealing processes of reappropriation, glocalization, counterflow and, occasionally, resistance to major media conglomerates (Tomlinson, 1999). Last, in relation to the often-universalistic claims of media effects theories, the study of audiences showed why these only ever apply contingently, for media influence is always 'read' through the lens of audiences' lifeworld contexts (Bird, 2003).

Yet this group seems curiously reluctant to keep in mind that audience research, nurtured by a rich mixture of semiotic theory, cultural critique, ethnographic methods and the feminist revalorization of the 'everyday', poses a continuing challenge to complacent hopes that audiences can be taken for granted and, so, permitted to slide down the ranking of research priorities. Audiences may be messy, unpredictable, hard to locate, as liable to undermine the researcher as they are to behave as desired (Livingstone, 2010). But that is what makes them interesting and significant both their own right and also when framed as publics, users or any other category of social actor in today's thoroughly mediated societies. For an audience researcher, the mediation of ever more dimensions of society expands rather than contracts the task ahead. Indeed, the more contradictory the claims about citizens versus consumers, individuals versus crowds, participants versus couch potatoes, the more interesting the task to explain how they can, as they must, all be part of the same population – ordinary people, the general public, albeit now living in a heavily-mediated world. This is not to say that analyzing processes of mediation through the lens of audience research is always useful. But I suggest that, in whatever field of society one might examine, whenever the textual, technological or institutional dimension of communication is in some way important to the unfolding action – for example, whenever the symbolic, representational or cultural aspect of a situation is complex, its power influential or its strategy or purposes contested – audience research (in terms of its theory, methods, findings and politics) will have something to

contribute. Furthermore, once one is attuned to the frequent and often contradictory assumptions made about people in relation to media or mediation (i.e. about people as audiences), whether within or beyond the academy, it is striking how amenable they become to empirical investigation; and such an investigation becomes all the more motivating the more it becomes apparent that tacit assumptions about audiences are often misguided, at odds with the evidence.

But for the second group of researchers – those who regard the study of audiences with a puzzled frown, audiences are judged almost irrelevant to the larger project, an idiosyncratic source of error, a naïve confusion of voice with truth, a complicating distraction from what really matters – power, production, regulation, representation, market. This is the group who led the backlash against the then-exciting project, castigating it through extreme formulations as supposedly asserting unfettered polysemy or excessive resistance or naïve celebrations of agency and individualism (Hartley, 2006). Yet as I have argued elsewhere, to challenge the authority of text analysts is not to deny the importance of texts. To recognize local processes of meaning making is not to deny the political-economic power of major media conglomerates. To assert that media influence is contingent is not to deny its existence. And to research the shaping role of diverse lifeworlds is not to deny the social structures that, through a complex dynamic, strongly shape those lifeworlds (Livingstone, 2010). As David Morley pointedly observed, "these models of audience activity were not… designed… to make us forget the question of media power, but rather to be able to conceptualize it in more complex and adequate ways" (2006: 106).

Nonetheless, it seems that the audience project – and a recognition of significance of ordinary people's collective and individual experiences of living in a 'digital world' (Couldry, 2014) - must be reasserted for each generation of scholarship, rearticulated in relation to each new phase of socio-technological change and, perhaps most interesting, reflexively rethought as the very conditions of modernity are globally reconfigured. One starting point is to insist on ecological (or cultural or holistic) accounts of mediation in society rather than linear accounts of influence that start with a powerful source and neglect to trace the process through to what is now (problematically) termed the 'end-user' (here James Carey, 1975, is a key inspiration). There are many possibilities here, but among these I suggest the potential of the circuit of culture model remains untapped. As originally set out by Johnson, Hall, du Gay et al (op cit., see also Champ 2008), this cyclic and transactional model recognizes that audiences are vital to completing the 'circuit of culture' in which production, text, institution, representation, governance, interpretation and identity all find their place, for all these elements are mutually articulated in the mediation of culture (Mayer, 2005). As Richard Johnson put it, in these multi-sited struggles for the power to shape the forms and flows of meanings in society, each moment is shaped by particular social practices and contexts, and at the same time, "each moment [in the circuit] depends upon the others and is indispensable to the whole" (1986: 284).

As Ranjana Das and I have argued recently, part of the appeal of this model is its emphasis on how these struggles over meaning occur at the interfaces between the distinct yet mutually-dependent moments in the overall circuit (Livingstone & Das, 2013). The circuit is not, therefore, a matter of positing links among autonomous spheres of activity (production, regulation, representation, etc.) but, rather, of recognizing that each 'moment' in the circuit is constituted dynamically, processually - through its interface with the others (Silverstone, 1994). For instance, representation is constituted significantly through its processual relations with production, regulation, interpretation, and vice versa. For this reason, John Fiske's (1992) proposed replacement of the noun, audience, with a verb – 'audiencing' – was

constructive, even if grammatically awkward. Media and communication research takes a false step, I suggest, each time it reifies any of these 'moments' in the process as self-contained entities 'out there', divorced from wider structures of meaning-making. And it regains its ecological integrity and insight each time it grasps the transactional interrelations among audiences, representations, institutions, governance and other powerful processes.

Das and I further sought to historicize our argument, recognizing the many ways in which the circuit of culture has been structured over time, and inviting future researchers to debate its present and emerging form or, more likely, forms. Thus we suggested that, before the advent of mass media, the communicative interface was largely defined by the social (and situated) relationship between speaker and hearer, with worrying uncertainties (for those holding power) ensuing in circumstances where this situated relationship was displaced by the formation of a crowd (itself linked to notions of rabble, rumor and riot). Following the spread of print cultures (and, equally important, print literacy), the communicative interface (now framed through the pairing of text and reader) became dispersed across space and time, reconfiguring communities and crowds into the new collectivity of the public with the potential – much debated – for sustaining not merely a rational reading public but a fully-fledged public sphere. With the twentieth century rise of broadcast media, the communicative interface was once again localized in time though dispersed in space, literacy as a barrier to participation was removed, and the notion of the mass audience was born, in part torn from its association with the public and instead aligned with the market (and paired as 'audience' or, disaggregated as 'viewers' with producers and/or programs). Yet this period sowed the seeds of its own transformation (one couldn't say destruction exactly) as the market became global, and audiences had to work ever harder to make sense of the imported as well as home-grown meanings on offer, thereby demonstrating their potential, modest perhaps, to reconfigure the interface in the direction of their own interests and concerns (Liebes and Katz, 1990); hence the metaphoric re-appropriation of the text/reader pairing in 'active audience theory', deliberately highlighting the importance of interpretative communities in context (Radway, 1988), and linking today's increasing fragmentation of attention and contingency of shared experience back to pre-broadcast times (e.g. Darnton, 2000). Now that the interface (further reconceived in terms of users and 'affordances'; Bakardjieva, 2005; Lievrouw, 2011) has become networked, any and all forms of communicative interaction are possible (mass and niche, vertical and horizontal, one-way and multi-way). It is noteworthy that while navigating and even participating in the shaping of meanings at the digital interface seems to permit greater equality between 'users,' 'produsers' (Bruns, 2008) and 'producers', its high access and literacy (and legibility) prerequisites are generating greater inequality among the 'users' as they engage not only with media but with the world through media (Deuze, 2012).

While it is fascinating to observe that the sense of present and pressing socio-technological change makes many of us look back over a longer past than has been common, at least in twentieth-century communication research, the wider transformations wrought by globalization are, in parallel, making many of audience researchers look across cultures and contexts to recognize the nature and scale of difference in the phenomena under study. Such a comparative or transnational lens also recasts our understanding of ourselves as researchers – at the least, inviting the de-Westernization of communication research or, more radically, de-centering any sense of 'us' and 'our' tradition of knowledge and ways of knowing – as Eurocentrism, orientalism and imperialist visions are challenged by post-colonial critiques (Chakrabarty, 2008; Haringdranath, 2012; Wang, 2011).

In reflecting on a recent collaborative effort to understand how audiences are talked about, presumed about and even regulated for around the world (Butsch & Livingstone, 2013), it was fascinating to observe how scholars writing about India, China, Russia, Egypt, Zimbabwe and elsewhere in effect reconstructed the circuit of culture to contextualize the conflicting interests at stake among the constructions of audiences variously asserted by the state, media industry, church, academy and, bottom-up, from the people themselves. None was able to explain (implicitly, to 'us', an English-speaking, Western-centered readership) their object of study without carefully positioning audiences from country X or Y in historical, cultural and political terms. Possibly, by dint of over-familiarity, the past century of the West talking to itself about audiences has permitted us to take contextual factors for granted to the extent that we have reified and decontextualized the audience as not only 'out there' but often too far away to see clearly or bother with. The advantage of a de-Westernized approach might be, therefore, both the chance to understand the many neglected forms of audiences (or 'audiencing') world-wide and also the chance to understand Western audiences in context, de-familiarizing the familiar and recognizing how audiencing is embedded in the wider circuit of culture.

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