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The rise and fall of audience research: An old story with a new ending

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It may be that just as capitalist economies go from boom to slump every ten years or so, the field of mass communications goes from polarisation to convergence over a similar period. Perhaps more than other fields of social science research, mass communication research has been dominated by key theoretical and methodological oppositions which underlie the fierce debates and splits within the field. These oppositions include critical versus administrative research, the study of texts (which itself is conducted in very different ways) versus the study of audiences, and the use of qualitative versus quantitative methods. Relations with other fields have also often been oppositional, contrasting rather than integrating interpersonal and mass communications, film and television, high and low culture.

The last ten years have seen a widespread and enthusiastic call for convergence in theoretical approach and research traditions (e.g. Livingstone, 1990; Schroder, 1987). This call for convergence has centred on the audience of mass communication and generated a body of research which draws upon diverse theoretical and methodological traditions and which has attracted to audience research many hitherto more concerned with texts or production. Convergences in theory and method have drawn new approaches into the field: for example, theories of literary reception from high culture are now being investigated empirically in relation to popular culture (e.g. Radway, 1984), and the theoretically significant notion of context-dependent meaning is being studied through ethnographic approaches to audiences (e.g. Seiter et al., 1989; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992).

Most radically, there has been some convergence across the major division within mass communication research, that of critical versus administrative traditions. Fejes (1984) argued that while administrative research has tended to neglect the text, resulting in often crude assumptions about the 'sovereign viewer', critical research must face the converse problem, that of the 'disappearing audience'. The legacy from critical theory has often meant that audience interpretation and activity has been assumed rather than examined, being supposedly predictable from theories of ideology and hegemony and thus neglecting concrete and local contexts. Integrating audiences and texts across these opposed traditions of research has, not surprisingly, generated considerable debate in the field.

This recent history is now being told in a variety of ways (see the special issue of

European Journal of Communication, June 1990). For some the 'failure' of convergence could have been, and was, predicted from the start: Maybe audience research should become a less significant area of media research and maybe theory development should proceed without the problematic and time-consuming expectation of doing empirical research. For others, the convergence has been so successful that we can now all proceed with a harmony of pluralist aims, doing away with the impediments to research imposed by outdated divisions and prejudices. And some have been unaffected by the debates, continuing their research as before.

In his overview of the field of mass communications, Katz (1980) describes a history of oscillation between conceptions of powerful media and powerful viewers. Switching from one to the other roughly every decade, research has replaced a notion of the mass audience with that of a selective audience as part of a two-step flow of communications, replacing this in turn with the passive viewer of the Behaviorist approach, which then gave way to the active viewer of uses and gratifications and social cognition. This history inspires a certain pessimism--maybe the active and interpretative viewer of the 1980s and 1990s is merely the next stage in a fashion cycle. Are the apparently new questions about open texts, subversive pleasures, audience reception and so forth merely reworkings of earlier questions, soon to be replaced by their opposites? Curran (1990) suggests that many ideas recently hailed as new are indeed reworkings, a 'new revisionism', of ideas current in the 1940s or earlier.

Katz' history is, of course, the history of the administrative approach which, after its common origin with the critical approach in the Frankfurt School of the 1930s and 1940s, has proceeded largely in isolation from it. However, the recent convergence--actual and potential--between administrative and critical schools of mass communications plays a key role in changing the pattern of oscillation, making all the difference between a history of oscillating active and passive audiences and a dialectic process of theory development in the field. The convergence of the two schools over the issue of audience reception and related concepts of decoding, reading and interpretation, as effected through numerous symposia and conferences (e.g. Seiter et al., 1989), has surely left a lasting legacy. These debates have not simply been about swinging from passive to active, text to audience, mass to public, and nor have they been simply about generating new research questions--of pleasure, reception, interpretation, the domestic context of viewing. Rather, they represent attempts to transcend the old polarities altogether so they cannot be asserted again, questioning and rejecting a range of generalities which have previously structured the field for one or both schools over their history to date.

The convergence of administrative and critical schools during the 1980s is, moreover, a historical phenomenon: many of their key issues, as discussed below, have become particularly problematic in recent years, prompting the need for a radical rethink. With the rapid and diverse developments in communication technologies, with the ever-increasing interdependence of media and daily life, and with the growing cross-cultural spread of mass media, many issues are now coming to the fore which could not have been anticipated and whose analysis draws, necessarily, on contemporary developments in deconstruction and social theory. Let us now discuss some of these issues.

Despite the persistence of the labels, much mass communications research is

now neither simply administrative nor critical. This is not to say that convergence has been wholly successful; much research is proceeding as if no debates had been held. Rather it is to argue that any research project should consider text, audience and context, that the argument in favour of empirical investigation of any amenable theoretical development has largely been won, and that the ideological underpinnings of both the research process and its subject matter can be legitimately questioned by all. After all, much research from either tradition can be, and often is, used either to support or to critique the status quo.

Text and audience can no longer be seen as independent or studied separately. As audience reception and reader-response theories have made clear, text and reader are interdependent, mutually conceived, joint constructors of meaning. Rather than conceiving of powerful texts and passive viewers or of indeterminate texts and powerful viewers, a negotiated position is required which recognises the complexity of the interaction between text and viewer, where encoding may differ radically from decoding. The attack on structuralism, where elite critics locate unique and determinate meanings 'in' the text and where actual interpretations by readers are either neglected or regarded as misguided or incorrect, has changed the way we conceive of meaning.

Meaning emerges from the specific and located interaction between text and reader, where texts must be considered virtual until realised by actual--rather than ideal--readers. Texts attempt to position readers as particular kinds of subject through particular modes of address and they make invitations to readers to insert specific knowledge or perspectives into the interpretive flow. Readers may accept or neglect such textual invitations and constructions of subject positions, reading against the grain while avoiding aberrance, exploiting the inevitable degree of openness in the text, playing with textual conventions, and thereby jointly constructing different meanings on different occasions: "As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion too" (Iser, 1980, p.106). To consider both text and audience is not simply a matter of including two discrete elements but of examining their interdependence.

The traditional separation of interpersonal and mass communication, assumed by both administrative and critical research, is untenable. Ethnographic research particularly has shown the significant ways in which family talk about, say, the Royal Family or racism inevitably takes place in a media-dominated environment (e.g. Billig, 1991; van Dijk, 1991) and, conversely, the media must be located in the living room--a locus of domesticity and family interaction (Goodman, 1983; Liebes and Katz, 1990). The appropriation of communication technologies into domestic spaces raises issues of gender, culture and power which frame the ways in which they are experienced and used (Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). The phenomenon of parasocial interaction, for example, means that we must now ask about rather than presume that we understand the overlapping processes which underlie both mass and interpersonal communications.

The diverse social contexts of viewing, the variable nature of viewers' involvement, and the proliferation of media technologies, have transformed "watching television" into an activity which is essentially diverse and context-dependent. When Fogel argues that the talk show "has the hegemony over our contemporary dialogue-values" (1986, p.153), thus undermining the separation of face-to-face and

mediated communication, and when for Carbaugh, Donahue is a "cultural performance of individuality" (1988, p.xiii), undermining the separation of individual and mass, again it is not a matter of including both interpersonal and mass communications in research, but one of recognising their mutuality, each acting to construct the other.

Two notions of 'mass' have been questioned by recent research, that of the mass audience and of the mass media. When talking of the mass media, we must now specify the channel of interest, not because print and television are opposites but because different media and different channels are received in different ways, and these contexts must be explored. Similarly, the genre of a programme is significant. As the soap opera debate (e.g. Livingstone, 1990) made clear, the category of 'television' varies enormously with different genres; watching soap opera involves different audiences, patterns of involvement, domestic arrangements, and critical modes of interpretation compared with, say, the news.

While for some, television is still fundamentally a mass medium, Corner (1991) argues that recent audience research has itself evolved a new opposition, furthering either the 'public knowledge' project (a focus on news and current affairs in relation to the politics of information and the viewer as citizen) or the 'popular culture' project (a focus on fiction and drama in relation to the social problematics of taste and pleasure). The problem is now to reintegrate these projects and to undo the problems which have arisen from this, as in other, polarisations in research.

Implicit in these two projects is a notion of diverse viewers and viewing styles, undermining the generic category of 'viewer'. The mass audience has been shown to be significantly heterogenous, particularly in relation to gender, class, culture and age, but also in relation to cognitions, involvement and styles of viewing, as both reception and ethnographic research have demonstrated. In short, the 'mass' of mass communications has been challenged and theories and methods must adapt.

Any new body of research attracts criticism, and audience research is moving from a phase of enthusiasm to one of self-analysis. The notion of the active viewer can be taken too far, neglecting the constraining action of the text or treating trivial variations among readings as theoretically important. There is a problem of theorising pleasure: Without adequate analysis of power relations among social groups, any divergence in interpretation may be seen as a sign of political opposition or subversion of the status quo, given a hegemonic analysis of the preferred reading of the text. The boundaries of the text sometimes threaten to dissolve altogether, once we recognise problems of intertextuality, textual encrustations, and zipping and zapping across programme flow. So too does the notion of "audience" when the surprising diversity of viewing practices are revealed. Finally, we must integrate socio-cognitively oriented work on the comprehension of narrative with interpretive work on the reception of connotative or ideological levels of meaning, without losing sight of the fundamentally social nature of reception processes.

All these issues concern the boundaries of theoretical arguments which, as with many theories, have initially been propounded in a simple and overextensive form and which, following empirical research, require some limitations and qualifications in their claims. There is, then, a boundary-placing exercise to be tackled over the next decade in order to make the most of developments in the last decade. Generally, the theoretical shift effected by the call to convergence within mass communications research

represents a considerable achievement theoretically, and any sense of uncertainty about how to proceed which now exists should be regarded with excitement rather than gloom. The reconceptualisation achieved may be exemplified through the issue of effects, a long-standing problem in mass communications.

Following a considerable critique of effects research through the 1970s and 1980s, this domain has become rather neglected of late. While a growing disappointment with both the theoretical resources and the empirical conclusions of effects research spawned a renewed interest in other aspects of mass communications, we have now argued ourselves into a position where questions of effect, as traditionally conceived, are not only too difficult to operationalize but don't even make sense. The required separation between cause and effect cannot be sustained once we allow text and audience or media and everyday life to become intertwined. If meanings are negotiated between text and reader rather than imposed by the former and submitted to or deflected by the latter, if everyday life is constituted within a media-dominated environment rather than affected by it, then we need new ways of asking about the social operation of power. Let us stop asking how audiences are affected by the mass media and start asking how particular audience groups engage in different ways with particular forms and genres of the mass media in different contexts. Whether or not sustainable generalities can or even should emerge from this study of the particular remains to be seen and debated over the next decade.

The potential of a mass communications which transcends old and unproductive polarities depends on the fruitfulness of the research questions it poses for the field. Let me conclude this essay by identifying certain new and significant research questions which have emerged over the last ten years and whose development may productively occupy the next.

The concept of audience reception must be elaborated further in relation to processes of both interpretation and comprehension, separating out miscommunication and mistakes from divergence and creative meanings. The link between pleasure and reception requires further work, going beyond present uses and gratifications theory, to examine how pleasures may be gained from both familiarity and novelty, from closure and openness, from normativity and subversion. In relation to both reception and pleasure, however, the operation of textual constraints must be specified rather than neglected, for engagement with a text designed to generate subversive pleasures must, for example, surely be a different experience from one in which such pleasures are obtained only by reading against the grain. The constraints imposed by viewers are also significant, yet little is known of the role of prior social knowledge, genre expectations and personal experiences of reception.

Text-reader relationships clearly differ according to the genre of programmes, and yet so far rather few genres--notably, the news, current affairs, and the soap opera--have been studied in audience research. What of the situation comedy, the game show, the talk show, the sports programmes, and many more? Different genres specify different 'contracts' to be negotiated between the text and the reader (Livingstone and Lunt, *in press*) which set up expectations on each side for the form of the communication (e.g. narrative, debate), its functions (uses and gratifications), its epistemology (e.g. the social realism of British soap operas, the 'window on the world' of the news, the scientific factual approach of the documentary), and the communicative frame (e.g. the

participants, the power of the viewer, the openness of the text, the role of the reader).

If different genres result in different modes of text-reader interaction, these latter may result in different types of involvement (Liebes and Katz, 1990)--critical or accepting, resisting or validating, casual or concentrated, apathetic or motivated. How shall we theorise this diversity of modes of interaction with the text? How, further, does viewer involvement depend upon family relations or other social dynamics surrounding viewing, or upon simultaneous engagement with multiple media, and conversely, how does it affect the face-to-face interaction and family conversation in which it is contextually embedded?

Broadening out the notion of context, we must ask further questions about cultural and societal contexts of viewing. Research has tended to pool studies from different countries towards the general goal of understanding the 'audience'--for example, Liebes and Katz (1990) studied different ethnic groups in Israel and America, Seiter et al. (1989) studied German viewers, Livingstone (1990) studied British viewers, and many have studied American viewers. In the case of Liebes and Katz' research, the focus was specifically on cultural differences, but generally theoretical significance of the country of origin of different research projects is neglected. Cultural contexts of viewing are often discussed in an ad hoc or post hoc manner, to explain specific results rather than to give a complex contextual understanding.

Finally, further methodological development is sorely needed. Two 'new' methodologies, which of course are both very old, have been used enthusiastically in recent audience research, but little developed over the past ten years: the focus group and ethnography. Undoubtedly, this research has demonstrated that viewers are active interpreters of texts and that viewing contexts vary widely in their impact on these interpretations. It is time for a sober assessment of these methods, given the problems which are raised through their use, and for their development and integration with other communication research methods. For example, how should the internal dynamics of focus groups be handled, how should the qualitative data which results be analyzed, how can 'bottom-up' ethnography interface with theory, what kind of contact with viewing contexts constitutes ethnography?

To restate the case, the field of mass communications, particularly in relation to the television audience, is not as fashion-led and mindlessly cyclic as it sometimes seems. In the last ten years, two kinds of development can be identified which have significant implications for the future of the field. First, the old polarities which have long structured the field have been finally transcended (or deconstructed) and cannot easily be returned to. Second, a new set of questions is emerging, both theoretical and methodological, which concern a range of particular issues and processes rather than generalities expressed in terms of the now-untenable categories of viewer, media, effect.

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