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The End of Audiences? Theoretical Echoes of Reception amidst the Uncertainties of Use

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Introduction

Once, ordinary people occupied much of their leisure time sitting on the sofa, often together with others, watching prescheduled hours of mass broadcast television, then talking about it the next day. Today, they increasingly supplement such moments by sitting, generally alone, in front of the computer so as to multitask music downloading, peer to peer chat, social networking, information searching and participation in multi-user games or civic forums. Notwithstanding striking differences between audiences on the sofa and users holding a mouse, each has been analysed in terms of a model of interpretation centred on the mutuality (though not the equality) of interpreter and that which is interpreted (reader and text, user and affordances). Further, each has been analysed in terms that counter any individualistic focus on audience/user motivation and/or skill, instead insisting upon the collaborative nature of interpretation contextualised within interpretative communities.

Question: what has changed and what remains constant between then and now? How shall we understand these activities and their importance for a heavily mediated digital age? Crucially - is the study of internet users best divorced from, or regarded as significantly continuous with, the study of television audiences?

In this paper we address ourselves to audience researchers more than information theorists or social studies of technology. Of course, audience researchers include several generations of scholars, living through overlapping histories - intellectual, technological, social - and this paper came out of a conversation between those from two contrasting yet perhaps parallel generations:

- one who 'came of age' at the birth of active audience theory, for whom the decisive intellectual agenda drew on cultural studies, ethnographic methods and the feminist revalorisation of the everyday in order to direct empirical and critical challenges both to structuralist and semiotic accounts of texts and to hegemonic accounts of media power, whether from critical theory or effects research.
- and one who is now 'coming of age' at the birth of web 2.0, for whom decisive factors shaping the research agenda include cross-media convergence, multidisciplinary debates over globalising media landscapes, a fascination with youthful digital natives, and a shift from working against to critically engaging with policy regarding, notably, e-participation, e-learning, e-exclusion and e-governance.

Despite contrasting research contexts and agendas, significant parallels remain, enabling a cross-generational conversation focused on the attempt to understand the nature of the interpretive work (Liebes and Katz, 1993) and the fit (or lack thereof)

between genre structure and audience interpretation. Although we approach such questions from our distinctly different intellectual moments, this conversation also raises broader questions for the position of media audiences and media users within the changing field of media and communication.

Question: what can Sonia pass onto Ranjana and what new things does Ranjana need to know or do?

What did audience reception studies offer?

The contribution of audience reception studies, after several decades of theoretical work and empirical study, might be distilled into three key insights, each an argument against what went before (Livingstone, 2008). Specifically, audience reception studies revealed that:

- Audiences' readings could not be predicted from a knowledge of the text alone, this undermining the analyst's authority in identifying a singular, underlying meaning of any media text by demonstrating that polysemy operated not only in principle but also in practice.
- Audience readings are always plural, diverse, this demanding that interpretation be situated in relation to specific social contexts, and counter-posing the creativity of a locally-resistant viewer against the hitherto-confident claims of media imperialism.
- Everyday micro-tactics of appropriation reshape and remediate media texts and technologies, thus insisting on the contingency of mediation processes and so challenging top down, often universalising accounts of diffusion and effects.

These three insights, it will be seen, concern respectively three key concerns for media studies - meaning, context and agency. In this way, audience reception studies sought to understand how everyday processes of interpretation have wider implications - for example:

- the potentially civic implications of audiences engaging with media in the public sphere (audiences as publics or citizens)
- the contested balance between creative and commodified conceptions of the audience (audiences as consumers or markets)
- the contribution of people's daily, local media practices to processes of globalisation and transnational flows (audiences as communities, whether cosmopolitan, local or diasporic).

Thus audience reception studies contributed vital insights to the critical analysis of what Richard Johnson (1986) called the 'circuit of culture'.

Question: Are these still today's debates? Do these arguments still need to be made? If not, what's new, conceptually and/or empirically? And, recalling that much of audience research was originally proposed as a direct counter to conceptions of audiences as individual users (as in the functionalist uses and gratifications theory), are we about to repeat some old mistakes?

Fast forward ten years

Today, some important things have changed, shifting away from:

- the dominance of television to the rise of internet amid other simultaneously diversifying and converging technologies.
- a strong boundary between mass and interpersonal communication to a world of multiple forms of networked communication.
- the possibility of distinguishing audiences (or audiencing) from other social activities to the prospect of audiences so dispersed and embedded that it is impossible to say when or where people are not part of an audience.
- a world often theorised through a linear conception of production → text → audience to one more usefully analysed in terms of infrastructure - as a dynamic circuit linking *artefacts or texts* used to communicate or convey information; the *activities and practices* in which people engage to communicate or share information; and the *social arrangements or organizational forms* that develop around those devices and practices (cf. Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006).

Indeed, audience researchers even face claims that 'the audience is dead', that the term 'audience' no longer applies, and that since internet users are so newly active, television audiences must, after all, have been passive.

Indeed, in the shift from one-way mass media to interactive digital media, many previously comfortable concepts such as texts, readers, audiences, interpretation and genres are becoming difficult to use. For example, the idea of genre as a strictly defined classification of media forms and types is undermined by the pace of hybridisation, diversification and convergence. Does that mean we abandon the concept of genre altogether? Or, following the reception theorists (Iser, 1974, Eco, 1979), is their value in retaining the notion of genre as a contractual relationship between audience or users and the media, whatever the medium involved?

Yet, if we dismiss the conceptual repertoire of *audiences* and *audience reception*, this does not in and of itself generate a suitable conceptual repertoires with which to replace it. We note here both the revision of 'audience' as, after all, passive by comparison with the active or agentic user, as well as the unease around *users*, a term that is both individualistic and not necessarily related to communication at all (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006; see also Hartley, 2009). The methodological challenges are also pressing, given the difficulties of researching internet use in private spaces, on the move, often with faceless others, in other words, challenges that did not apply for viewers sitting on a sofa (Livingstone, 2004).

Evidently, in the three insights we distil from audience reception studies, concerns that lay at the heart of audience reception- meaning, agency, resistance, participation, conversation, interaction, and many others are still the pressing concern of new media researchers. Interactivity brings us to the question of participation, deliberation and civic engagement more than ever before, as audiences transform into bloggers and cause activists on social networks. Resistance must remain the concern of any new media researcher interested in how users deal with, oppose or even reject (or not) manipulation and power, not only from institutions but

also among peers. In what follows, we seek to identify some theoretical echoes of reception amid the uncertainties of use.

Question: is nothing constant? Or is change for audiences more evolutionary than revolutionary, as is readily argued for technologies?

Claim: for both theoretical and empirical reasons, we suggest in this paper that there remain important continuities between the older and newer studies of processes of mediated communication.

The theoretical claim

First, we observe the continued need for a theory of how people engage creatively, critically, diversely, with mediated texts, including now texts in which they participate. The literature is grappling with some familiar problems - it again risks celebrating an excessive notion of agency; it still struggles to keep in its sights both users' engagement with texts on the screen and the real world social contexts which shape that engagement.

Second, we observe a return of the singular authoritative text. However complex and subtle online texts are held to be, they are not often conceived as open to multiple interpretations, leaving gaps for users to fill, preferring readings that shape users' responses. Once again, there is a pressing task of countering implicit assumptions of the world wide web as a window on the world, of websites whose meaning can be straightforwardly stated by the researcher, of an online world that presents the same face to all comers, MySpace or Wikipedia or Second Life being inviolate objects of singular meaning, however diverse the uses to which they are put.

A singular text, of course, makes for an audience that is either homogenous (everyone responds in the same way) or one whose heterogeneity is either merely idiosyncratic or explained solely by social determinants (everyone responds according to their circumstances). But it does not allow for diverse modes of engagement in which the very meaning of the text is realised only in the act of interpretation - in Eco's (1979) terms, of actualisation, as today's readers pass through digital texts (Fornas et al, 2002). Hence few studies reveal multiple *readings* across users. And many appear content to analyse online spaces with no reference to audiences or users whatsoever. Once again, people are reduced to subjects and agency is lost.

Intriguingly, when researchers do, in fact, work with alternative notions, they use strikingly similar concepts to those used in studies of television and film reception:

- inscribed users remind us of sutured subjects
- implied users echo implied audiences and ideal readers
- semiotics of links harks back to the polysemy of televisual codes
- technological affordances resemble preferred readings
- communities of practice expand on interpretive communities
- remixing cultures extend recognition of playful or resistant readers

Thus we see researchers reaching back for old concepts, refashioning them for this new digital era - interactivity, of course; but also genre, perhaps text (some ambivalence there), narrative....

Also, of course, we see them seeking out some new concepts - literacy is the one that interests us most, with digital literacies harking back more to the analysis of print literacy than audiovisual literacy, though all now fall under the contested heading of 'media literacy'.

Question: can this collection of concepts and ideas, drawing on but also updating and extending audience reception studies be productively distilled for future research?

The empirical claim

The empirical claim for continuities across media, and across intellectual generations, is simpler to convey: when we listen to audiences talking about television and when we listen to people talking about online texts, they sound very similar.

We are in the middle of comparing Sonia's interviews with audiences for talk shows, as reported in *Talk on Television* (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994) with Ranjana's interviews with people talking about social networking sites, as explored in her ongoing PhD.

Though there is no space to develop examples here, it is noteworthy that, in both, we hear people talking about the mediation of public fora, whether in relation to talk shows or social networking - they use these media to provoke deliberation, they critique the constructed nature of the text, they worry about the representativeness of those who participate, they disagree with each other about exactly what is meant, even about what is said.

Question: are the interpretative processes at stake here sufficiently similar that findings from reception studies can be reformulated as hypotheses for new media engagement? And in what ways is people's engagement with online media distinctively or new?

Conclusion

In developing this paper further, we are working towards identifying an agenda of questions and a repertoire of concepts that carries forward that which is still valuable and relevant from earlier research to provide a constructive basis for new research - recognising continuities but open to revision so as to meet new challenges.

We conclude, therefore, by focusing on three core concepts of continued relevance:

- At the heart of any inquiry into how people engage with processes of mediation is the concept of interpretation. By investigating the relationship between encoding and decoding, or virtual and realised text, or sign and interpretant, one may ask the question: how are meanings produced and reproduced? In today's task of meaning production, users operating in a peer to peer environment are often highly collaborative, even undertaking the physical alteration of the texts themselves, thus reshaping the media environment experienced by others.
- But texts are not endlessly alterable; they too present conventions and norms, like mass media texts. In a mediated world shaped by texts, technologies and cultures, processes of interpretation still continue to cluster

by genre, this providing a way of analysing patterns of stability or commonality and also openness and diversity across media forms and readings. Thus, going beyond the classification of texts, 'genre' brings into focus the conventionally-established 'contract' between text and reader, between affordances (Hutchby, 2001) and use - each implies the other, each holds out expectations of the other, each completes the other. The problems in retaining the concept of genre are as exciting as the promises it holds, for where is textual stability and where are textual boundaries when a single product is consumed across multiple platforms as is, for instance, film merchandise - where a single text morphs across multiple forms and travels through society (Barker and Mathijs, 2008)? What can one say about authorship and linearity in collaborative storytelling?

- Third, widening out our perspective from the close analysis of interpretation at the interface of text and reader, technology and user, we focus on literacy. Literacy makes us ask, what does the reader or user bring to bear on the process of interpretation; here we point to the social literacy or new literacies theorists to situate audiences in time and space, and to recognise that literacy is culturally and historically conditioned, not simply a matter of individual cognition. Literacy also implies a text to be read, raising questions of legibility - what interpretations are afforded, what knowledge is expected, what possibilities are enabled or impeded.

It should be apparent that we favour these three concepts because:

- they apply across media and so also work for a multimedia digital environment
- they work across time, inviting questions of continuity and change without starting all over again
- most important - they are all concepts of the interface (Livingstone, 2008): of text and reader, literacy and legibility, ultimately - structure and agency; they permit crucial indeterminacies, interdependencies and contingencies; but they neither reduce to technological or social determinisms nor celebrate unlimited polysemy.

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