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The mass television audience diversifies

Fifteen years ago Allor (1988: 217) was far from alone in suggesting that 'the concept of audience is more importantly the underpinning prop for the analysis of the social impact of mass communication in general'. Today, given the growing range of information and communication technologies which come under the heading of 'media studies', audience research must ask itself whether its theories and methods are tied to a historically-specific medium - mass broadcast television - or whether instead there are lessons from the study of mass television and its audience which can guide the analysis of the new media environment.

Throughout the latter half of the last century, in most industrialized countries, television has been a medium which has dominated our leisure hours, our national cultures, our domestic living rooms and our modes of family life. It achieved a comprehensiveness of appeal and reach never before surpassed nor likely to be in the future. Clearly, television is

changing, diversifying its forms, extending its scope, penetrating further into public and private life. The home contains multiple sets, each with multiple channels, and these are converging with multiple other technologies - telephony, radio, computing, even print. The activity of viewing, therefore, to which we have devoted so much attention, is converging with reading, shopping, voting, playing, researching, writing, chatting. Media are now used anyhow, anyplace, anytime.

With the benefit of hindsight, we see that the 'television' of media theory was temporary rather than timeless, particular rather than universal, a historically and culturally specific phenomenon which lasted – in Europe and North America, at least - for just forty years or so, from the 1950s to the 1990s. Now that the history of audiences is beginning to be told, it is becoming clear that, as with television, audiences were not the same before and will not be the same again. For the past half century, we have not so much researched 'the television audience' as we have researched national, often public service, mass broadcast, non-interactive television along with a nationally-conceived, consensus-oriented, sit-back on the couch, family audience in the living room. Recent rhetoric from the BBC exemplifies these apparent changes. Today, it says, the BBC is 'rethinking its relation to the audience in a digital age'. No longer is the elite and powerful mass broadcaster seeking to inform, entertain and educate the nation, instead the BBC hopes to be 'connecting communities', 'a facilitator of communities of interest online', seeking to address and – significantly – to invite or 'mediate user-generated content' from a diversity of audiences, local and global, according to their specific interests and across a range of platforms including broadcasting and the internet (Childs, 2003).

It seems that mediated communication is no longer simply or even mainly mass communication ('from one to many') but rather the media now facilitate communication among peers (both 'one to one' and 'many to many'). Perhaps even this distinction – between peer-to-peer and mass or broadcast communication - is becoming outdated as new and hybrid modes of communication evolve. Or are these claims for change overstated? If some say that the days of television are over, that the concept of the audience is becoming obsolete, others warn against getting carried away by the hyperbolic discourse of 'the new', neglecting significant historical continuities and so reinventing the wheel of media and communications research.

To take another example, the technological interface of the internet facilitates both one-to-one and one-to-many communication processes, but such a technological convergence

does not necessarily result in a convergence or blurring of types of communication (though the economics of new media markets may alter the balance between one-to-many and one-to-one communications, just as the political economy of new media may alter the balance of power between participants in a communicative exchange). Indeed, just as hybrid genres on television – talk shows, for example – seem to reaffirm long-standing analytic categories (expertise, experience, authority, argumentation) precisely through their apparently destabilising effects, so too the hybrid forms on the internet (voting for *Big Brother*, for example, or online chat about the soaps) are fascinating but do not necessarily undermine well-established distinctions in the field of communication. Or at least, this is an empirical as well as a theoretical question, demanding continued investigation into the production, circulation and interpretation of texts in context – and so into the activities of audiences.

While we debate the move from old to new (Jankowski et al, 1999), other academic disciplines – information science, education, social studies of technology, human-computer-interaction, economics - are becoming interested in the changing communication environment. Problematically, each of these fields, understandably, locates its centre of gravity elsewhere, framing the media as a specific and only contingently influential factor in their analysis; hence they underplay the symbolic, institutional and social complexity of the media. Particularly, they tend to defer the study of audiences and users of new information and communication technologies to the last stage in a long chain of more interesting processes. So, the old arguments which rendered audiences visible, interesting and significant must be rehearsed and adapted for new times.

Given these changes and challenges, this paper has been motivated by a sense that the energetic programme of audience research is not yet playing to its strengths. Ten or so years ago all was confidence and excitement in reception and then ethnographic studies, accompanied by ambitious talk of convergence of text and reader and, more grandly, of qualitative and quantitative methods, political economy and cultural studies, even social science and humanities. But soon after, the signs of dissatisfaction with supposedly celebrated, resistant, active audiences together with some of the supposedly flimsy methods used to research them, were loudly voiced and perhaps too readily acceded to, resulting in something of an exodus (of interest, of researchers) from audience studies as the field turned its attention to ever-newer media or other cultural phenomena.

Meanwhile, the media industry, having boldly taken over the many of the ideas and methods of the academy – including semiotics, critical and cultural studies and ethnographic methods – is, unlike some in media studies, agog with the fate of the audience – as it decamps to the internet and computer games, as it chooses global brands over public service programmes, as it finally fragments away from the mass audience, following its fandoms across media, innovating in intertextual, transtextual, unexpected practices of use. And while industry and government actively pursue some lively regulatory debates, the academy is not as engaged – not being so keen to desperately seek the audience - as perhaps it should be.

This is doubtless melodramatic - many continue in audience research, neither derailed by the radical contextualism of the ethnographic turn nor by the arrival of new media. After all, television still occupies many hours of our days, being centre stage for our political life, focal point for popular culture and preferred window onto the global drama. Yet the challenge of a moving target, and hence a changing subject matter, faces us all. Has the internet and its users taken over the agenda? Look at recent journal issues, ask where research funding is going or what our students want us to lecture on. So, this paper also asks, what is the audience researcher to do in the age of new, converged, interactive media?

Taking the text-reader metaphor forward

The argument for the active television audience has probably been taken as far as it can go. But what is intriguing and challenging for audience research is the ways that new interactive technologies put interpretative activities at the very centre of media design and use. As Fornas et al (2002: 23) comment, 'recent digital technologies have radically enhanced these kinds of interactivity by explicitly emphasizing the user's response and active assistance in the formation of the media text itself and by developing particular tools to facilitate this'. Thus, the new media environment crucially extends the scope and importance of arguments in 'active audience' theory by transforming hitherto marginal (and marginalized) tendencies into the very mainstream of media use. Audiences and users of new media are increasingly active - selective, self-directed, producers as well as receivers of texts. And they are increasingly plural, whether this is conceptualised as multiple, diverse, fragmented or individualised. Hence, key terms in audience research are more, not less, significant in the new media environment - choice, selection, taste, fandom, intertextuality, interactivity. At the same time, the theoretical and policy agenda of audience research has a renewed relevance, raising questions of harmful content, domestic

regulation of media, participation in a shared culture, ensuring informed and democratic consent, and so on.

A good start would be to explore how far tried and tested ideas about audiences, following the text-reader or encoding-decoding approaches, can usefully be applied to users of new media (Livingstone, 1998). After half a century of television audience research, we know that processes of media influence are far more indirect and complex than popularly thought. We know that not only does the social context in front of the screen frame the nature of the engagement with what is shown on the screen, but that in many ways which we can now elaborate, people are active in shaping their media culture. And we have a critical account of how the media industry shapes, and constrains, people's material and symbolic environment, for the separation of producers from audiences (or consumers), and the power imbalance between them, is of course the prime subject of media and communications research.

Audiences have been found to differ from researchers in their reception of media content. And since audiences work to make sense of media contents before, during and after viewing, they are themselves heterogeneous in their interpretations, even, at times, resistant to the dominant meanings encoded into a text. Viewers' interpretations diverge depending on the symbolic resources associated with their socio-economic position, gender, ethnicity, and so forth, although some possibilities for critical or oppositional readings are anticipated, enabled or restricted by the degree of closure semiotically encoded into the text. In short, engaging with symbolic texts rests on a range of analytic competencies, social practices and material circumstances.

In the field of television studies today, no-one would presume the nature of audience response from knowledge of media content alone, nor argue for a direct link between the meanings supposedly inherent in the text and the effects of those meanings on the audience. Yet this is far from the case in new media studies, resulting in a distinct sense of *déjà vu*. We seem to treat 'the internet' as a 'black box', despite having developed a complex theory of codes, genre, mode of address etc for analysing television. Tacit assumptions are made about internet users - their interests, thoughts and choices - as if we never found it necessary to study empirically the implied and actual readers of television texts. And speculation about the impact of the internet too rarely remembers the long and frustrating debate over the – in fact, indirect, contingent and multiply determined - effects of television.

Consider how accounts of 'what's new' about the internet rely on speculation regarding the user's role and engagement. For example, it is claimed that hypertext 'offers different pathways to users…the extent of hypertext is unknowable because it lacks clear boundaries and is often multi-authored' (Snyder, 1998b: 126–7). And that 'hypertext seems to add dimensions of writing, and to that extent may encourage new practices of reading as well: ones that might prove more hospitable to alternative, non-traditional points of view and more inclusive of cultural difference' (Burbules, 1998: 107). Stimulating though these speculations are, they are reminiscent of semiotic analyses of film and television before the advent of audience reception studies, full of assumptions about the interpretative role of the reader (Eco, 1979) and leaving open the door to prejudiced or naïve assumptions about the activities of real, socially-located audiences (then we disparaged the trashy housewife fan of soaps, now, in an interesting about turn, we admire the super-sophisticated youngsters hacking their way to anarchy).

So, let's research internet and other new media users. How do people follow hypertext pathways? Does it add new dimensions of writing? Are new practices of reading emerging? Are these more hospitable to alternative views, more inclusive of difference? More generally, what are the emerging skills and practices of new media users? How do people variously 'read' the world wide web? What practices surround the use of the web, email, chat, and so forth? What competencies or literacies are people thereby developing?

Think back to how psychological research on reading revealed the dependence of the interpretative strategies of the reader on the structure of the text – influencing visual scanning of the page, checking back and forth or across headings and following the narrative or logical structure of text segments (Coltheart, 1987). Audience reception research, albeit taking a more cultural approach, revealed parallel connections between the conventions of television and viewers' decoding strategies – the soap opera viewer, for example, builds up an understanding of the characters, puzzles over the secrets, eagerly anticipates the cliff-hanger, guesses the outcome of a subplot, recalls when appropriate the significant events from past episodes, etc, all in accordance with the conventions of the genre (Livingstone, 1998). But what do we know of someone engaging with a computer screen, searching the web or playing an adventure game online?

In the new media environment, it seems that people increasingly engage with content more than forms or channels – favourite bands, soap operas or football teams, wherever they are to be found, in whatever medium or platform. Fandom is increasingly important as

audiences fragment and diversify. And as media become interconnected, increasingly intertextual, it is content irrespective of the medium that matters to people *qua* fans, for they follow it across media, weaving it seamlessly also into their face-to-face communications. This is not to say that form is unimportant. In television studies, the concept of genre offered a way of thinking about the interaction between text and reader: how the text organises its expectations of, invitations to, spaces for, the reader; how a reader orients to, generates hypotheses about, becomes involved with, the text; how cultural conventions shape individual media experiences; how creative and selective activities of individual authors and readers generate or modify cultural conventions. So, what are the genres of new media?

Reception studies may prove particularly apt for a focus on the new technological interfaces and contents. Certainly, the texts of the new media pose some particular challenges: they are often multimodal, hypertextual and ephemeral, as is the case for much of the world wide web; they blur production and reception; and they result in the emergence of new genres or facilitate the convergence of once-distinct practices. Can the conceptual repertoire of the text-reader approach – with its stress on openness, indeterminacy, textual invitations, interpretative paths, preferred readings, and so forth – help here in developing an integrated analysis of new media texts and audiences? At present, the analysis of new media audiences is impeded by the lack of a sophisticated analysis of the new media environment in terms of text, technology and cultural form. Unlike in the early days of audience reception studies, when a subtle reading of audiovisual texts - whether based on literary criticism, ideology critique, semiotics, rhetorical analysis, etc - was already in well-established, today research on new media texts and their audiences must proceed in tandem.

Framing the methodological tasks ahead

In beginning to approach these questions, even the most sophisticated commentators can be seen to fall back on common-sense description of personal experience – their own children playing games, their mother learning to use the internet – apparently forgetting that audience research has developed an extensive range of methods precisely in order to challenge *a priori* assumptions, generalisations and misconceptions about 'the audience'.

Three challenges have, over several decades, driven the search for methodological rigour: the gap between what people say they do and what they do in practice (inevitable yet problematic, even though both discourse about viewing and viewing practices are

significant); the relation between text and reader – i.e. the process of interpretation, as it relates to a diversity of media, genres and forms; the question of consequences or effects – why the received meanings of television matter in everyday life. In addition, as in all social science, audience research has grappled with questions of demography – of the distribution of meanings and practices across a diverse population. In turning to new media, especially to the internet, how far can we learn from the experience of audience research, and how far must we begin again? Arguably, each of the above challenges is magnified for the internet.

Methodologically, audience research is faced with trying to capture experiences which are private rather than public, experiences concerned with meaning rather than overt practices, experiences of all society not just the elite, experiences commonly regarded as trivial and forgettable rather than important. In researching internet use, practice is often very private, located in the bedroom or study, making the audience researcher's presence even more salient than the days of observing family television in the living room. Internet use is at times highly personal, even transgressive – including intimate conversations, pornography, personal concerns, etc, making observation or interviews difficult. Even if we get close to the experience of internet use, it is unclear how to record this – completing a survey about an evening's viewing is tricky but by no means as tricky as recording an evening's surfing, game playing or instant messaging.

Further, the interpretative relation between text and reader online raises both practical and theoretical problems. New media researchers have no stacks of neatly labelled video tapes on their shelves, no stacks of newspapers in the corner of the office, no industry records of audience ratings categorised by demographics; rather they barely know how to track their 'texts' given the three-fold problems of overwhelming volume of material, temporary existence of material, and its 'virtuality' (hypertext being dependent on users to 'actualise it'; c.f. Eco, 1979). Further, there are no easy distinctions to be made in terms of channel, form or genre, there being few textual studies on the basis of which audience research can formulate its questions. Add to this the fact that online people are producers as well as receivers of content, and that they routinely multitask across platforms and applications, and the extent of the challenge becomes apparent, exacerbated by the fact that many users of the research are themselves unfamiliar with the medium.

Lastly, the question of consequences is being asked with some urgency by policy makers and public alike. As with the early days of television (Wartella and Reeves, 1985), this

public/moral agenda foregrounds simple effects questions, largely focused on averting harm, and only gradually and reluctantly learns to ask more complex questions of meaning and practice. Hence, the research community is asked: does internet use result in harm to children and young people? does inadvertent exposure to pornography produce long-term harm, does playing violent games online make boys more aggressive, does immersion in a branded consumer culture produce a more materialistic generation, is the internet changing the way children think and learn? – all questions which, as we know from television effects research, are impossible to 'answer' in any simple fashion.

Clearly, as with audience theory, there are methodological lessons we can take forward into new media studies and there are new problems to be faced, some of which are just beginning to be addressed (e.g. Hine, 2000).

New media – texts to be interpreted, technologies to be used

In analysing television audiences, reception was located precisely at the interface between textual and social determinations. In extending this to other domestic media and communication technologies, Silverstone (1994) contrasts the media *qua* material/technological objects (located in particular spatio-temporal settings) with the media *qua* texts/symbolic messages (located within particular sociocultural discourses). The former invites analysis of media use in terms of everyday domestic consumption practices; the latter invites an analysis of the relation between media texts and the interpretive activities of particular audiences. In consequence, the audience or media user is also doubly articulated as the consumer-viewer (or consumer-listener/player/surfer etc), for people are simultaneously interpreters of the media-as-text and users of the media-as-object.

However, when Radway (1988) called for 'radical contextualism' in audience research, she encouraged the analytic displacement of the moment of text-reader reception by ethnographic studies of the culture of the everyday, tipping the balance of audience research away from reception and towards consumption studies (Livingstone, 2003). In approaching the new media environment, this imbalance must be righted, for here as before, both articulations of the new media are crucial. After all, although all technological innovations are undoubtedly rendered socially meaningful through practices of use, only the media mediate (*sic*) symbolic communication. Moreover, the text-reader metaphor of reception studies avoids the focus on technology *per se*, and thereby sidesteps the charge of technological determinism which is rather too readily (and at times unfairly) levied against

those claiming that (technologically) new media are also new in social terms (for the language of texts rather than technologies lends itself to talk of facilitating, affording or preferring, rather than influencing or impacting on).

In short, whether the media in question involve the peer-to-peer communication of email, or the one-to-many communication of a global news network, new media and communication technologies are text-centred. They not only have symbolic meaning as objects *per se* but they carry multiple, diverse and changing symbolic messages. Hence, where a sociological account of consumption or of everyday practices of use will suffice for the washing machine or the toaster, it will not do so for the walkman or the games machine. Hence the promise of a text-reader analysis.

Intriguingly, the history of audiences suggests that relations between reception and consumption are themselves historically contingent. It turns out that the invisibility, or privatization, of what audience members are thinking, or learning, or feeling is a rather new (i.e. twentieth century) problem, initiating a separation between the use of media-as-goods and the reception of media-as-texts. In earlier centuries, use and reception were more intimately connected, so that reception could be to some degree 'read off' from the participatory activities of audiences in particular social contexts of media engagement or use (see historical accounts of the visible and audible participation of live audiences for shows, carnival, theatre, etc., such vociferous activity thereby marking their pleasure and displeasure, their critical response or their incomprehension, etc; Butsch, 2000). Hence, how people acted materially, in time and space, during as well as before and after the performance, revealed their symbolic, emotional and cognitive engagement with the text.

But in the age of mass television use and reception became disconnected, and audiences' interpretative activities in particular became privatised and interiorised, and so relatively inaccessible to observers. This inaccessibility became the focus of moral anxieties, centring on the fundamental ambiguity, to the observer, of the (at least initially) newly silent, physically inactive audiences. Is the person sitting quietly on the sofa watching television part of a respectable audience, paying careful attention and concentrating on understanding and benefiting from the entertainment offered, or are they passive couch potatoes, dependent on media for their pleasures, uncritical in their acceptance of messages, vulnerable to influence? And, if they do not sit quietly, as increasingly they do not, are they active audiences participating in their social world or disruptive audiences, unable to concentrate? Such uncertainties on the part of the observer invite prejudiced

interpretation inflected by class and gender: a middle class man attentively watching the news is assumed to be alert and thoughtful, a working class woman attentively watching a soap opera is assumed to be mindless and uncritical; other people's children stare mindlessly, your own can be trusted to concentrate properly.

In an interesting reversal of this trend, it seems that now, in the new media environment, reception may be once again gleaned – at least to some extent - from an analysis of use. For audiences are increasingly *required* to participate audibly and physically, albeit that their activities require a subtle eye on the part of the observer. Users are, necessarily, clicking on hypertext links in order to create a sequential flow of images on the world wide web, typing in order to co-construct the messages of the chat room, externalizing their interpretation of interface design and genre when producing their website, and manipulating their game character – visibly with or against the grain of the text - in order to keep the game going. They are also accumulating auditable references to their content selections though 'favourites' folders, inboxes, history files, software downloads, and so on.

So, although it will remain a methodological challenge to discover what participants are thinking or feeling when they engage with new media, it is thought-provoking that, increasingly, without people's physical and hence visible participation in the process of communication, there will be neither text nor reception in the first place. Hence, while the nature of 'audiencing' (Fiske, 1992) is surely changing, just as surely will audiences remain central to the analysis of the new communication environment.

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