The changing nature of audiences : from the mass audience to the interactive media user

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From the mass audience to the interactive media user

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Changing media, changing audiences

Modern media and communication technologies possess a hitherto unprecedented power to encode and circulate symbolic representations. Throughout much of the world, though especially in industrialized countries, people routinely spend a considerable proportion of their leisure hours with the mass media, often more than they spend at work or school or in face to face communication. Moreover, leisure is increasingly focused on the media-rich home, a significant shift in a matter of a single generation. Despite the popular anxieties that flare up sporadically over media content and regulation, it is easy to take the media for granted precisely because of their ubiquity as background features of everyday life. Yet it is through this continual engagement with the media that people are positioned in relation to a flood of images and information both about worlds distant in space or time and about the world close to home, and this has implications for our domestic practices, our social relationships, our very identity. This chapter overviews current debates within audience research, arguing that although developments in technology may threaten to overtake these debates, audience research will be better prepared to understand the changing media environment by adopting a historical framework, looking back the better to look forward. But let us begin with a scenario from the future:

> ‘You’ll go to the electronics story and buy a “home gateway” box the size of today’s VCR for maybe $300. You’ll hook it to a broadband cable, then connect it to your wired or wireless home network. You’ll call the cable provider and sign up for its custom-TV digital recording service for maybe $50 a month. You’ll hang a flat plasma display … on the living-room wall and connect it to a wall socket that also taps into the home grid. You’ll put modest displays in other rooms, too. As you leave the bedroom you’ll say “off” to its screen, and as you enter the kitchen you’ll say, “Screen, show me my stock numbers.” During a commercial you’ll use a little wireless remote to instruct the hidden gateway box to find, download and play an original *Star Trek* episode. When the episode ends you’ll grab the game controller off the coffee table, become Captain Kirk on the plasma screen and engage in a live, online dogfight in the Neutral Zone with an opponent from Tokyo’ (Fischetti, 2001: 40).

Notwithstanding the hazards of attempting to predict the future, it is notable that such futuristic - or realistic – scenarios are becoming commonplace. Moreover, in certain respects, this quotation neatly illustrates what is, perhaps, happening to ‘the audience’, at least in industrialized countries, my focus here. It reflects an already-present pressure to develop and market intelligent, personalized, flexible information and communication technologies that increasingly bring the outside world into the domestic space. These technologies converge on the electronic screen, while screens are themselves increasingly dispersed throughout the home. We are promised the satisfaction of our egocentric desires to have our individualistic tastes or fandom precisely catered for, whether on television, computer games, etc, thereby permitting us the satisfying shift from passive observer to active participant in a virtual world.

Contextualising technological change in everyday life

There is a tension, however, between such visions of radical technological change and our knowledge of the slow-to-change conditions that underpin identity, sociality and community. Hence it is imperative to put media, especially new media, into context, so as to locate them within the social landscape, to map the changing media environment in relation to the prior communicative practices which, in turn, shape that environment. The very multiplicity of contextualising processes undermines the simple account of the impacts of technology on society which circulate in popular discourses. The practices of our everyday lives, both material and symbolic, are dependent on structures of work, family, economy, nation, and cannot be so quickly overturned by technological change. For example, changes in disposable leisure time, in working practices or in the gendered division of domestic labor profoundly shape the ways in which new information and communication technologies diffuse through society and find a place in our daily lives.

Furthermore, given what we already know from today's technology, the above scenario leaves open some crucial questions. Where is everyone else in this scenario – the people we live with, the people who want to watch something other than Star Trek, who laugh us out of our pretence at being Captain Kirk or who, irritatingly, have lost the wireless remote? The history of researching mass communication is a history of how the mass mediated world relates to the social world of the viewer and, even in the short history of the internet, research has already moved beyond characterizing the supposedly autonomous online world towards exploring its complex connections with the offline world (Slater, 2002). Surely, the social consequences of new technologies will be mediated through existing patterns of social interaction. Further, how does our protagonist know in this scenario that he or she likes Star Trek? We know we like it because that was what everyone watched on Wednesday evenings for years, so that it became embedded in our daily lives as we

compared the different series with friends, laughed at the clothes, and followed the lives of the stars on the talk shows. For the generations with a common culture already established, this individually tailored future may be enticing. But how will the new generation establish content preferences in the first place, faced with an overwhelming range of unfamiliar choices. And once they've made their choice, how will they share the experience with others, drawing media into the common discourses of playground and office?

This is not to say that the media have no influence on society, but rather that such processes of influence are far more indirect and complex than popularly thought. Central to recent work on media audiences is an analysis of the ways in which people can be said to be active in shaping their media culture, contributing to the process of shaping or co-constructing their material and symbolic environments. Today such research has two main foci, one centered on the contexts of media *use*, the other on the *interpretation* of media content. Though one or other of these foci tends to dominate the agenda at any point, it is assumed in this chapter that both are integral to an adequate theory of audiences. In adding a reflexive spin on the consequences of both social and technological change, Pertti Alasuutari (1999: 6) argues that 'the audience' as a social phenomenon 'out there' must be replaced by the recognition that the audience is 'a discursive construct produced by a particular analytic gaze'. Hence the analysis of audiences must also include the very discourses which construct people as audiences (or publics or markets, etc), including 'the audience's notions of themselves as the "audience"' (p.7).

History does not stand still

While in the main, media research restricts itself to the contemporary, it is clear that researchers are studying a moving target: what were once 'new' media become familiar while yet newer media emerge. Changing social and cultural contexts also shape audience practices. Consider the shift from the physically contiguous mass spectatorship of the

eighteenth century theatre or show to the spatially separated 'virtual' mass of press and broadcasting audiences in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Even the half century of national television - which in the USA, Europe, and many other countries spans the period from the 1940s to the 1990s - has witnessed major social transformations, including world war, post war austerity and then consumer boom, the unsettling conflicts of the sixties, the rise of free-market ideology and, now, *fin-de-siecle* uncertainty, these affecting all aspects of society from economic globalization to the patterns of family life.

Yet, too often media researchers talk of 'television' – and, by implication, 'the television audience' - as if it were unchanging over its own history. Thus throughout the many decades of audience research, researchers have asked important questions about the uses of media, and about the effects of the media (McQuail, 1997). Yet audience research has shown too little inclination to seek a historical explanation for research findings, though this may help to explain the often unwelcome variation in findings. Only since the 1990s - or a little earlier in some countries - has 'television' been so transformed by the expansion in channels, especially global and narrow-cast ones, by the crisis in public service – especially in Europe - and by the advent of new technologies such as the VCR and now digital television, that it has become obvious that specifically new questions are arising for the audience as much as for the medium (Becker and Schoenbach, 1989; Neuman, 1991). What will these changes mean for audience theory? And could it lead to a new sensitivity towards, interpreting audience findings in relation to the specific period within which research studies are, or were, conducted?

Making audiences visible in media theory

Media theory has always been committed to the integrated analysis of production, texts, and audiences. While traditional approaches to mass communication analyze each as separate but interlinked elements in the linear flow of mediated meanings, cultural and

critical approaches stress the interrelations of these elements in the (re)production of cultural meanings (Hall, 1980). But in practice it has too often been the case that the analysis of production and texts has been primary, while the interpretative activities of audiences has been neglected (Livingstone, 1998a). Audience research rectifies this tendency by fore-grounding the cultural contexts within which meanings are both encoded and decoded and acknowledging the importance of the socially shared (or diversified) aspects of those contexts. As Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1993:26) argues:

> 'Reception analysis offers insights into the interpretive processes and everyday contexts of media use, where audiences rearticulate and enact the meanings of mass communication. The life of signs within modern society is in large measure an accomplishment of the audience'.

Thus, audience research asks, how do the media (through institutional policy, genre conventions, modes of address, etc) frame relations among people as one of 'audience'? Indeed, do certain kinds of texts or technologies produce certain kinds of audience? Or, to put the opposite question, how do the social relations among people, at home, in the neighborhood or the nation, shape the communicative possibilities (electronic or otherwise) of those locales, enabling some and inhibiting others?

During the 1980s and 1990s, empirical audience research became prominent in media studies. I have argued that this success was due to the productive convergence of several traditions, within each of which compelling arguments led inexorably towards empirical research on audiences and, especially, their interpretive activities (Livingstone, 1998b). Indeed, for a while, the perception was that 'the concept of audience is more importantly the underpinning prop for the analysis of the social impact of mass communication in general' (Allor, 1988: 217), and that the audience is 'a potentially crucial pivot for the understanding of a whole range of social and cultural processes that bear on the central

questions of public communication...[which are] essentially questions of culture' (Silverstone, 1990: 173).

Things move fast in audience studies, and one may now observe with some disquiet various attempts to retell this convergence as a linear, indeed canonical narrative in which audience reception studies provide a stepping stone in the rise of cultural studies (Alasuutari, 1999; Nightingale, 1996). As Vincent Mosco (1996: 251) observes, 'cultural studies reminds political economy that the substance of its work, the analysis of communication, is rooted in the needs, goals, conflicts, failures and accomplishments of ordinary people aiming to make sense of their lives, even as they confront an institutional and symbolic world that is not entirely of their own making'. Important though this claim is, by subordinating audience research to the heroic narrative of cultural studies, audience research has in turn become separated from some of the diverse interdisciplinary traditions that stimulated its development, and whose potential contributions have yet to be explored fully. So, let us review briefly the central arguments of these diverse traditions.

Multiple traditions of audience research

We may begin by noting the crucial influence of literary and semiotic theory for the understanding of popular culture. Particularly, in developing the concepts of *the implied reader or model reader,* reception-aesthetics theorized how texts anticipated, invited, and so were fitted for, readers with a specific interpretive repertoire of codes, presuppositions, and interpretive frames. Thus Umberto Eco (1979) stressed how readers must strive to realize the necessarily virtual meaning of a text by drawing on their own cultural resources during the process of interpretation. Or, as Wolfgang Iser (1980, p.106) put it, 'the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualization but must be situated somewhere between the two... 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'.

A parallel argument, encapsulated by Stuart Hall's (1980) *encoding/decoding* paper, began by rejecting the linearity of the mainstream, social psychological model of mass communication in order to stress the intersections but also the disjunction between processes of encoding and decoding, contextualising both within a complex cultural framework. Influenced by Eco, Hall (1980: 131) incorporated elements of reception aesthetics into his neo-Marxist account of popular culture, proposing that "the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange - depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder/receiver". On this view, mass communication is understood as a circuit of articulated practices - production, circulation, reception, reproduction – each of which represents a site of meaning-making (see also Morley, 1992).

Crucially, this cyclic process contrasts with the widespread metaphor of communication transmission (Carey, 1989) that assumes that communication merely requires the more-or-less efficient transport of fixed and already-meaningful messages in a linear manner from sender to receiver. However, the social psychological tradition attacked by Hall and others re-launched itself through the promotion of the *active or selective audience*, making choices about media use. Thus uses and gratifications researchers saw audience reception research as setting the scene for building 'the bridge we have been hoping might arise between gratifications studies and cultural studies' (Katz, 1979, p.75; see also Blumler et al, 1985), while the social constructivist paradigm in social psychology applied itself to understanding mediated, rather than just face-to-face sources of social influence, thereby uncovering the '*sense-making'* activities of audiences in negotiating the conventions and rhetorics of media

texts. Through such concepts as the interpretive 'frame', social constructionist researchers sought to understand how people's tacit or local knowledge variously 'filled the gaps' or re-framed the meaning of media texts, resulting in divergent interpretations of the very same texts (Gamson, 1992; Hoijer and Werner, 1998; Iyengar, 1991; Livingstone, 1998c).

Research on these sense-making activities was appropriated by critical communications research in its advocacy of the *resistant audience* as part of the theoretical shift from dominant ideology theory to the hegemonic struggle between attempts to incorporate audiences into the dominant ideology and sources of resistance to such incorporation, even if this resistance remains tacit or implicit. Although for some, the evidence for resistance or divergence has been overplayed (Curran, 1990; Schiller, 1989), this argument was partly fuelled by a desire to uncover the limits of cultural imperialism through an exploration of the sources of local resistance to imported meanings (e.g. Liebes and Katz, 1995). As David Morley (1993: 17) concludes, 'local meanings are so often made within and against the symbolic resources provided by global media networks'. Also influential among critical theories, particularly in identifying resistant audiences engaged in the construction of alternative cultural rituals and practices, feminist approaches to popular culture promoted a reconsideration of the often vilified popular culture audience within cultural theory, developing a revaluation of, and the giving of a voice to, hitherto *marginalized audiences* (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984).

Making sense of television

Having argued that media texts are polysemic, that meanings emerge from a context-dependent process of interpretation and so will be mutually divergent (Fiske, 1987), it became obvious that research should investigate the activities of actual audiences in order to know how they interpret programs in everyday contexts. Hence, the stimulating convergence – or at least intersection – of these arguments in favor of empirical audience

research produced something of a research ‘boom’ in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet the generation of a sound basis for understanding the activities of audiences was accompanied, theoretically, by a move away from a careful consideration of particular reception theories such as those of Iser, Eco or Hall to a looser grounding in the blanket notion of 'reception theory' or 'audience reception analysis'. This project quickly justified itself through findings showing that audiences indeed do differ from researchers in their reception of media content, and that audiences are themselves heterogeneous in their interpretations – even, at times, resistant to the dominant meanings encoded into a text (in the form of a ‘preferred reading’; Hall, 1980). This further undermined any claims to presume audience response from a knowledge of media content alone, or of arguing for a direct link between the meanings supposedly inherent in the text and the consequent effects of those meanings on the audience.

As a result of these arguments, attention was redirected to studying the interpretive contexts which frame and inform viewers' understandings of television. Hence, empirical reception studies have variously explored the relationships between media texts – typically the television genres of soap opera, news, among others (Hagen and Wasko, 2000; Hodge and Tripp, 1986; Livingstone, 1998c; Tulloch, 2000; Wilson, 1993) – and their audiences. Audience interpretations or decodings have been found to diverge depending on viewers’ socio-economic position, gender, ethnicity, and so forth, while the possibilities for critical or oppositional readings are anticipated, enabled or restricted by the degree of closure semiotically encoded into the text and by audiences’ variable access to symbolic resources. The point is not that audiences are 'wrong' but that they construct their interpretations according to diverse discursive contexts which are themselves socially determined. As a result of this now considerable body of work, audiences are no longer thought of according to the popular image which always threatens to recur, as homogenous, passive and

uncritical or vulnerable to the direct influence of meanings transmitted, and perhaps manipulated by, the mass media.

Media-centric research?

Critiques of audience research have grown in tandem with its success, centering on the supposed untenability of the central concept of the audience itself: how can we define it, measure it, place boundaries around it, and in whose interest is it if we do so anyway (Ang, 1990; Erni, 1989; Seaman, 1992)? One outcome has been a charge of media-centrism (Schroeder, 1994), attacking audience research for defining its object of study purely in terms of a technological artifact (the television audience, the movie-goer, etc). This critique has force partly because an increasingly *ad hoc* collection of objects is included in the category of 'media', and partly because if audiences are defined in relation to technology, researchers are drawn into tracking how audiences change as technologies change rather than as society changes. Hence, one may ask whether anything, apart from the label 'audience research', integrates such diverse projects as identifying the pleasures of video games, investigating the agenda setting role of the press, incorporating the Internet into schools, or exploring the role of music in peer culture?

The defense from reception studies, I suggest, is that there is indeed a consistent focus underlying these questions, one centered on *communication*. Each is concerned with the conditions, contexts and consequences of the technological mediation of symbolic communication among people (Thompson, 1995). It is charting the possibilities and problems for communication (i.e. for relations among people rather than relations between people and technology), insofar as these are undermined or facilitated, managed or reconstituted by the media, that offers a challenging agenda, and one which puts audiences at the center of media and communication research, rather than locating them - or worse, deferring their study - as the last stage in a long chain of more interesting processes.

The ethnographic turn

> 'The qualities and experiences of being a member of an audience have begun to leak out from specific performance events which previously contained them, into the wider realms of everyday life' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 36-7).

An influential response to doubts over media-centrism has resulted in a further strand of audience research, namely a more systematic exploration of the *contexts* of media use, thereby moving ever further away from the medium itself in search of the local sites of cultural meaning-making which shape people's orientation to the media. Several arguments led to this focus on context. As Robert Allen (1987) argued, once textual and literary theorists had made the crucial transition to a reader-oriented approach, context flooded in for two reasons: first, the shift from asking about meaning of the text in and of itself, to asking about the meaning of the text as achieved by a particular, contextualised reader (i.e. the shift, in Eco's terms, from the *virtual* to the *realized* text); second, the shift from asking about the meaning of the text to asking about the intelligibility of the text (i.e. about the diversity of sociocultural conditions which determine how a text *can* make sense). Thus the crucial transition was made, from text to context, from literary/semiotic analysis to social analysis (Morley, 1992).

Of course, these should not be posed as either/or options, for the moment of reception is precisely at the interface between textual and social determinations and so requires a dual focus on media content and audience response. But in practice, the demands of more fully contextualising reception in order to understand how audience activities carry the meanings communicated far beyond the moment of reception into many other spheres of everyday life, as well as the converse process of the shaping of reception by the symbolic practices of everyday life, has led to calls for what Janice Radway (1988) called 'radical contextualism' in audience research. By this she means the analytic

displacement of the moment of text-reader reception by ethnographic studies of the everyday, a focus on 'the kaleidoscope of daily life' (Radway, 1988: 366) or, for Paul Willis, an analysis of 'the whole way of life' (1990). Like Radway, Ien Ang (1996: 250-1) also sees the ethnographic approach displacing reception studies. Thus, she observes that:

> 'Television's meanings for audiences - textual, technological, psychological, social - cannot be decided upon outside of the multidimensional intersubjective networks in which the object is inserted and made to mean in concrete contextual settings ... this epistemological move toward radical contextualism in culturalist audience studies has been accompanied by a growing interest in *ethnography* as a mode of empirical inquiry'.

Following these arguments, the 'ethnographic turn' in audience research shifts the focus away from the moment of textual interpretation and towards the contextualisation of that moment in the *culture of the everyday*. Thus ethnographic audience studies have explored the ways in which media goods become meaningful insofar as they are found a particular kind of place within the home, the domestic timetable, the family's communication ecology. Simultaneously, it is becoming clear that this process of appropriation also shapes, enabling or restricting, the uses and meanings of the medium for its audience or users. Studies of the radio (Moores, 1988), telephone (Moyal, 1995), television (Spigel, 1992), satellite television (Moores, 1996), and diverse other media (e.g. Flichy, 1995; Mackay, 1997), trace the specific contextualisation of the media in today's media-rich home.

Media-as-object, media-as-text

Where does the ethnographic turn leave reception studies? Through the concept of double articulation, Roger Silverstone (1994) contrasts the media *qua* material objects such as the television or walkman, namely as technological objects located in particular spatio-temporal settings, with the media *qua* texts such as the news or the soap opera, namely as

symbolic messages located within particular sociocultural discourses. Broadly, to focus on the *media-as-object* is to invite an analysis of media *use* in terms of consumption in the context of domestic practices. On the other hand, to focus on the *media-as-text* is to invite an analysis of the textuality or representational character of media contents in relation to the interpretive activities of particular audiences. By implication, then, the audience is also, necessarily, doubly articulated as the *consumer-viewer*.

Frustratingly, researching audiences simultaneously in terms of reception and contexts of use seems hard to sustain. In the classic figure-ground illustration of the Gestalt theorists, we see two heads facing each other with a gap in between, or we see the vase in what was the space while the surrounding objects become invisible. Understanding audiences in terms of either what's *surrounding*, or what's *on* the screen has something of this character: the further one stands back from the television set to focus on the context of the living room, the smaller the screen appears and the harder it is to see what's showing. And vice versa. Yet clearly, the box-in-the corner is the occasion for social interaction - or isolated pleasures - precisely because of its symbolic content.

In short, people are always both *interpreters* of the media-as-text and *users* of the media-as-object, and the activities associated with these symbolic and material uses of media are mutually defining. And clearly, ethnographic studies of audiences draw on the same insights as reception studies - the stress on active audiences making contingent and context-dependent choices, on fragmentation and plurality within the population rather than the normative mass audience, on audiences as joint producers rather than merely consumers of the meanings of media – in order to develop the study of the local, typically domestic contexts within which media-as-objects are appropriated as part and parcel of everyday life. Hence, it should not be so hard as it seems to be to keep both these activities, reception and use, in the frame simultaneously.

Historicizing audience research

Understanding why a focus on either use or reception seem to be unnecessarily bifurcating audience research requires a historical lens. Consider the early days of television, and indeed the following thirty or forty years, when households were proud to acquire a television and place it in the living room, albeit sometimes frustrated with each other regarding how they were going to use it (Morley, 1986). In Europe, America and other Western countries at that time one could view just a few channels, each addressed to 'the nation' according to a predictable schedule (Scannell, 1988). Given these circumstances, the interesting questions for researchers concerned texts more than contexts of use. While the dynamics of family life seemed relatively homogenous and deeply familiar, it was the texts which seemed most innovative, as national cultures transferred, and transformed, their traditions of news, drama, comedy, etc, into audiovisual content.

By contrast, as today's households acquire multiple television sets along with the capacity for multiple channels, multiple video recorders, personal computers, mobile phones and, most recently, the Internet, the proliferation of new media technologies at home has something of the character of old wine in new bottles. For in the main, these intriguing new media objects have carried old media messages, recycling the broadcasters' archives, proliferating new shows using old formats, uploading existing print media onto the world wide web. As yet, the promised transformation in content or text is not much in evidence. Hence the figure-ground image in the research literature is shifting, and now it seems to be the ethnographic contextualisation of the changing media environment that poses the most interesting challenge to audience researchers. Judging from recent historical work on past 'new' media, this challenge of the new is stimulating some to reevaluate our understanding of the arrival of these past media (e.g. Corner, 1991; Hansen, 1991; Marvin, 1988;

Schudson, 1991). This historical perspective serves to reveal the historical specificity of the terms of today's debate over audiences.

From live to mass audiences

The crucial shift - away from the live audience for theatre, spectacles, political meetings, etc to the distributed audience for mass communication occurred in relation to books and the press, less because of the technological innovation of printing, for that came much earlier, than because of the cultural and institutional innovation of mass education and hence mass literacy. While that earlier model of the audience, which we now distinguish as 'live', was characterized by face-to-face communication among people gathered together in public meeting places, the 'reading public' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was primarily receptive rather than participatory, dispersed rather than co-located, privatized rather than public (Luke, 1989; McQuail, 1997); and it is this which characterizes audiences for subsequent (mass) media.

Historically, this is not a story of discrete phases, in which one medium displaces another (Fischer, 1994), but rather one of the accumulation of modes of '*audiencing*', as John Fiske puts it (1992), each coexisting in our complex media environment. Nonetheless, at any one time one medium is on the ascendant, discursively positioned as the 'new' medium that epitomizes the popular hopes and anxieties of a society. As Kirsten Drotner (1992) has shown, these not-always laudable hopes and fears – for the 'proper' development of children's imagination, for the dis/orderly behavior of the working class audience, for the normative reproduction of moral and cultural knowledge across the generations – tend to be repeated as each 'new' medium becomes widely available.

Reception leaves no record

In researching past media, it is noteworthy that the history of audiences is particularly problematic. The institutional production of media and the actual media texts are

comparatively well recorded - there are memos, letters, policy statements, economic statistics and so forth documenting media production, and there are archives of past films, newspapers, television and radio programs. While these are never as complete as one would like, they exist. By contrast, beyond the limited records of circulation, box office sales, television ratings, etc, audience history encounters a serious problem of sources. In their routine daily activities audience leave no physical record (although see Richards and Sheridan, 1987). Given the importance to research on contemporary audiences that research makes visible the otherwise taken-for-granted, neglected or misunderstood experiences of ordinary people, one can understand Jensen's (1993: 20-1) anxiety when he notes that:

> 'Reception does not exist in the historical record; it can only be reconstructed through the intervention of research...Whereas ratings and readership figures presumably will survive, the social and cultural aspects of mass media reception are literally disappearing before our eyes and ears.'

Historicizing audience reception faces multiple problems. With the shift away from visible and audible participation by live audiences, the activities of the new, mass mediated audiences became highly interiorized and hence inaccessible to the researcher. Methodologically, one is trying to capture experiences which are private rather than public, experiences concerned with understandings rather than practices, experiences of all society not just the elite, experiences which are past rather than present, experiences commonly regarded as trivial and forgettable rather than important.

The surprising history of the active audience

Such evidence as can be discovered is proving intriguing, not only for our understanding of the past, but also for our understanding of the present. Richard Butsch (2000: 2) observes that:

> 'While the underlying issues were always power and social order, at different times the causes of the problems of audiences had different sources. In the nineteenth century, the problem lay in the degenerate or unruly people who came to the theater, and what they might do. In the twentieth century, worries focused on the dangers of reception, how media messages, might degenerate audiences. In the nineteenth century, critics feared *active* audiences; in the twentieth, their *passivity*.'

This nineteenth century audience has a longer history. In Elizabethan England, theater audiences were highly active, asserting their right to participate, vocally critical or appreciative, or even ignoring the action by loudly engaging in conversation, walking about or playing cards during the performance. Indeed, the more noisy they were, the more privileged they were seen to be, actors having the status of servants. As Butsch comments, 'aristocratic audience sovereignty affirmed the social order' (2000: 5), a provocative reversal of the present day argument that consumer sovereignty asserts the power of the people against the control of the property-owning elite.

How did things come to change? Butsch shows how, as the plebeian audience followed the example of their betters, incorporating elements of carnival into their own performance as an audience, by the nineteenth century the privileged classes had came to fear, and so to critique and attempt to control, this rowdy, 'over-active' lower-class audience. The importance of manners – together with the introduction of such physical constraints as bolting chairs to the floor and dimming the lights – came to dictate

attentiveness and deference to the performers on the part of a 'respectable' audience in the theatre and the early days of cinema. Meanwhile, 'active' engagement with the performance marked the lower classes, with the consequence that 'audiences at these entertainments let slip their sovereignty and were contained if not tamed' (2000: 6).

Reception becomes interiorized

One may speculate that it was the contrast with the visible activities of the live audience which preceded it that contributed to twentieth century worries about the television audience. How much do these worries center on the fundamental ambiguity, to the observer, of 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, are the active audiences participating in their social world or disruptive audiences, unable to concentrate? Such uncertainties 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 are mindless, your own can concentrate properly (Davison, 1983).

Interestingly, in the days when audiences participated vociferously, marking their pleasure and displeasure, their critical response or their incomprehension, there was, arguably, less of a distinction between media use and media reception – how people acted materially, in time and space, could be taken to reveal their symbolic or cognitive engagement with performances. Undoubtedly, documented accounts of the 'reception' of the first production of a Shakespeare play, for example, would feel free to assume what the

audience thought from how they acted. Butsch argues that the change came partly because of a transformation in *literary form*, although the introduction of the cinema further sedimented these new conventions. Thus, he suggests that:

> 'As realism replaced rhetorical styles of dramatic acting in the nineteenth century, the separation of audience from performer became paramount. Realism also required silencing audiences, making them passive. The "well-behaved" audience became preferred among the middle and upper classes to audiences exercising sovereignty, which became a mark of lower class' (Butsch, 2000: 9).

Such passivity not only describes the social conventions which govern polite behavior but also, as genre studies have argued, audience passivity is assumed by a narrative form dedicated to the construction of an impermeable, closed text in which the audience is firmly required to identify with the hero, no other position being available (McCabe, 1974). Yet, as audience reception studies have shown, audiences increasingly will not have it thus, their rapt and adoring gaze at the Hollywood film being ever less the norm for television (Ellis, 1992). Rather, audiences today read against the grain, finding the opportunities for engaging more creatively, or resistantly, with whatever openness they find within the text or, as television genres blur further one into the other, they delight in contesting the genre itself, questioning the shifting conventions of realism, joining in noisily albeit in the privacy of their living room (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994),

An oral history of the television audience?

Both media use and media reception have continued to change during the twentieth century. In terms of use, it seems that, as each new medium enters the home, it undergoes a gradual transition from pride of place at the center of family life to a variable status pitched somewhere between focal and casual, communal and individualized uses, where

these are spread spatially throughout the household and temporally round-the-clock (Flichy, 1995; Livingstone, 2002). Reception, however, remains more difficult. Since that century falls within living memory, I have argued (Livingstone et al, 2001) that the method of oral history could be used, although the difficulties in interpreting such data should not be underestimated (Samuel and Thompson, 1990). Again, we find the familiar problem, for conventional wisdom among oral historians suggests practices are more reliably recalled than meanings (O'Brien and Eyles, 1993). We may therefore have more confidence in asking people to recall going to the cinema in the 1940s than in asking them what they then thought of a particular film and how they interpreted it.

Consider Jackie Stacey's (1994) survey of women fans of Hollywood stars during the 1940s and 50s. Although she acknowledges the problems of oral history - 'these histories of spectatorship are retrospective reconstructions of a past in the light of the present and will have been shaped by the popular versions of the 1940s and 1950s which have become cultural currency during the intervening years' (1994: 63) - what comes over clearly is the fascination with glamour and escapism conveyed by her informants. As one comments, 'I think in those eras, we were more inclined to put stars on a pedestal. They were so far removed from everyday life, they were magical'. Must we conclude only that this viewer has reconstructed the past from the vantage point of the present, now seeing herself as a more knowing and critical viewer? Or can we agree with Stacey when she also argues that modes of perception, or relations of looking and seeing, are not universal but are historically contingent. As she puts it, the post-war period saw a shift from a spectator/star relationship based upon distance to one based on proximity.

Relevance, realism, relativism

In some recent research, my colleagues and I attempted to extend the oral history of leisure practices to the domain of media reception (Livingstone et al, 2001). The project

interviewed different generations, from people in their teens to those in their eighties, about the crime-related media they had seen throughout the postwar period (or such of it as they had lived through). Crime, and its representation in the media, proved a provocative subject, stimulating lively discussion of the media, society and its morals. From listening to what these different generations remembered or found interesting, the ways they talked about the different periods, the different media and, indeed, their lives today, we tentatively identified three changes.

First, and consistent with Stacey's argument, above, it seemed that while in the early post-war period, people found pleasure in crime media primarily for their escapist irrelevance, today's audience is strongly concerned with *relevance* – for them, the point of engaging with the media is that connections are made with one's own life. This stress on relevance motivates not only the gratifications sought from watching crime dramas but also the process of reception, so that where before, the characters and action were interpreted primarily in terms of the internal coherence of the – preferably glamorous – narrative, now interpretation draws more strongly on frameworks or situations from daily life while the narrative is, in turn, made to 'speak to' the audience's everyday experiences. That the importance of escapism was once greater is confirmed by Sally Alexander (1994) in her account of becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s. She argues that the cinema played a crucial role in making it possible for young women to conceive of other ways of living, particularly ways different from those of their mothers - glamour, freedom from drudgery and housework, romance, new conceptions of femininity. In other words, for them at that time, escapism was vital, and as Alexander sees it, positive in value.

Second, and connected with the desire for connection to one's own life, is a change in judgements of realism. The current, young audience preferred representations which they considered realistic (including the appeal of 'just like us' soap opera characters dealing with

crimes) and able to offer them useful information about crime risks etc. Realism for them means fuzzy moral boundaries, complex situations, seeing both sides of an issue, unresolved endings, seeing for oneself the physical consequences of violence. For the older audience, by contrast, realism was little talked about for past media, but has now been adopted as an evaluative criterion for present-day media. However, for them it is more likely to representations with recognizable characters, everyday settings, an absence of glamour or melodrama, a concern with minor crimes, and a lack of gratuitous or gory violence. Using these different criteria, then, we saw younger audiences criticize past media for their lack of realism by comparison with the present, while older audiences make the opposite judgement.

Third, we identified a change in the moral framework for interpreting media crime, from a frame of moral absolutism to one of contextualised relativism. A series of symbolic reversals were enumerated by the older generations: ever since the 1960s, they argued, the world is upside down - the police get sued by the criminals, the criminals get financial compensation or a comfortable life in prison while their victims are shown to suffer, the police are themselves corrupt, and so forth. Yet for younger people, these same observations are interpreted as far from distressing, as a legitimate relativism, realistic in a world where good and bad are a matter of contextualised judgements rather than abstract principles. All this has interesting implications for the reception process for what makes a 'good story' has been redefined, with audiences shifting from an interest in working out *who* is the baddie and *how* s/he will be caught to an interest in working out what it *means* to be the baddie and *whether* they will be caught.

From the past to the future

Although we have still little historical knowledge of reception – of people's understandings, interpretations, and critical awareness of media contents – we can hardly

suppose these historically invariant. Nor, of course, are these likely to remain constant given the continuing changes in both the media environment and the social contexts of media use. Beyond arguing for the importance of taking a longer-term perspective on audiences' engagement with the media than just the immediate lens of today's concerns, I have also suggested here that the very separation which is currently bedeviling audience research, that between the analysis of the use of media-as-objects and the reception of media-as-texts, is itself historically contingent. For the invisibility, or privatization, of what audience members are thinking, or learning, or feeling is a new (i.e. twentieth/twenty-first century) problem, and one which marks a new degree of separation – in theory, methodology, and practice - between the use of media-as-goods and the reception of media-as-texts.

I will end this chapter by sketching how this look back at the past may illuminate the future, drawing out implications of the above arguments for our understanding of how people engage with new media as objects and as texts. But first, one must address the semantic difficulty that one can hardly begin to analyze the new media without realizing that, in both ordinary and academic language, we currently face an uncertainty over how to discuss people in terms of their relationship with media. The term *audience* was, and to some extent still is, satisfactory for mass media research, but it clearly fits poorly within the domain of new media for, arguably, audiences are becoming 'users.'

The end of 'the audience'?

The term 'audience' only satisfactorily covers the activities of listening and watching (though even this has been expanded to include the activities which contextualize listening and viewing). The term 'user' seems to allow for a greater variety of modes of engagement, although it tends to be overly individualistic and instrumental, losing the sense of a collectivity which is central to 'the audience', and with no necessary relation to *communication* at all, leading one to wonder whether users of media technologies differ

from users of washing machines or cars. Analytically, audiences are being relocated away from the screen, their activities contextualized into the everyday lifeworld. They are also users insofar as they are grappling with the meaning of new and unfamiliar technologies in their homes, schools and workplaces. These media and information technologies open up new, more active modes of engagement with media -- *playing* computer games, *surfing* the Web, *searching* databases, *writing* and *responding* to email, *visiting* a chatroom, *shopping* online, and so on. We don't even have a verb to capture that increasingly important way in which people are engaging with media, namely fandom: one may be part of an audience for soap opera, but one's relation to Harry Potter, or Barbie, or even Manchester United[2] is precisely intertextual, spanning multiple media and hence multiple modes of engagement.

Rather than offering a new term here, I suggest that no one term can continue to cover the variety of ways in which technologies mediate relations among people. Hence, instead of asking what audiences - conceived as an artificial reification of a particular technological interface - are really like, we should rather conceptualize 'the audience' as a relational or interactional construct, a shorthand way of focusing on the diverse relationships among people – who are first and foremost workers, neighbors, parents, teachers or friends – as mediated by historically and culturally specific social contexts as well as by historically and culturally specific technological forms. For 'audience' researchers, then, the interesting questions are less and less, when and why do people watch television or read a newspaper, if this question means, implicitly, why do they do this instead of doing something else? Rather, as social spaces, and social relations, which are untouched by mediated forms of communication become fewer and fewer, we must instead ask questions about how, and with what consequences, it has come about that all social situations (whether at home or work, in public or in private, at school or out shopping) are now,

simultaneously, mediated spaces, thereby constituting their participants inevitably as *both* family, workers, public or communities *and* as audiences, consumers or users?

Reception and use converge

It was argued above that, while in earlier centuries, use and reception were intimately connected, so that reception could be 'read off' from the participatory activities of audiences in particular social contexts of media engagement or use, in the age of mass television use and reception became disconnected. In a curious reversal of this trend, I now wish to suggest that 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 conception of interface design and genre when producing their website, and manipulating their game character in order to keep the game going. They are also accumulating auditable references to their content preferences though 'favorites' folders, inboxes, history files, software downloads, and so on. Although it will remain a methodological challenge to discover what participants are thinking or feeling when they engage with such media, it is intriguing that, increasingly, without physical and hence visible participation in the process of reception, there will be neither text nor reception in the first place. However, most of this remains to be researched, as thus far, perhaps because new media technologies have arrived in our homes in advance of radical new notions of content, more audience (or user) research on new media has focused on media-as-objects rather than media-as-texts.

Undoubtedly, then, the new media pose some interesting challenges to audience research in relation to both reception and use (Livingstone, 1999). First, they facilitate the

multiplication of personally-owned media (from mobile phones to the television set), thereby encouraging the privatization of media use, including the media-rich bedroom culture of young people (Livingstone, 2002) and the sound bubble of the Walkman commuter. Further, the diversification of media and media contents, is facilitating wider trends towards individualization, in which media goods and contents are used to construct lifestyles no longer grounded in sociodemographically-defined traditions. More recently, the convergence of traditionally distinct media, is resulting in a blurring of traditionally distinct social boundaries ('edutainment', 'infotainment', tele-working, e-learning), potentially undermining traditional hierarchies of expertise and authority.

Most significantly, however, new media technologies hold the possibility of expansion of interactive forms of media, and the resulting potential for transforming a once-mass audience into engaged and participatory users of information and communication technologies. From the literature now emerging, it seems that these first three challenges are already being researched, particularly insofar as these concern changing discourses and practices of media use. But as for the fourth, we have barely begun to investigate the intellectual, symbolic and social contexts for and consequences of engaging with the particular forms and contents of the new media. Some preliminary observations may be offered, however.

From mass to interactive audiences

While the argument for the active audience of traditional media has probably been taken as far as it can go, interactive technologies now coming onto the market increasingly put such interpretative activities at the very center of media design and use. Thus, the new media environment extends arguments in 'active audience' theory by transforming hitherto marginal or marginalized tendencies into the mainstream of media use. Audiences - as users - are increasingly active (i.e. selective, self-directed, producers as well as consumers of

texts) and therefore plural (i.e. multiple, diverse, fragmented), although Neuman (1991: 166) is among many who question 'whether or not the proliferation of new communications channels will lead to fragmentation of the mass audience'. At the same time, the once-accessible and supposedly powerful media text is becoming as elusive as were audiences before: because hypertext, characteristic of Internet content, is 'a structure composed of blocks of text connected by electronic links, it offers different pathways to users... the extent of hypertext is unknowable because it lacks clear boundaries and is often multi-authored' (Snyder, 1998: 126–7). To use Eco's (1979) terms, the distinction between 'virtual' and 'realized' text is greater for interactive media, particularly for the flexible, impermanent, non-linear, hypertextual data structures of the Internet.

Potentially, the text-reader metaphor of reception studies may prove particularly apt for the new focus on the *interface*. Whether for the Internet, or digital television, or mobile technologies, analyzing the interface is proving demanding, for both designers and users (Star and Bowker, 2002), bringing questions of literacy increasingly to the fore (Tyner, 1998). Literacy has, of course, underpinned all previous phases of 'audiencing', from the conventions of participating in public performances, to the emergence of print literacy, the more recent conceptions of audiovisual or media literacy required to decode the genres and conventions of cinema and television, to the new questions posed especially by interactive media, especially the internet. And, as Luke (1989) points out, literacy – in encapsulating the cognitive and cultural competencies that underpin effective communication, and hence effective social functioning - has always been intimately related to questions of power and inequality. Here we return to a familiar debate within audience studies, now apparently to be replayed in the new media environment. For optimists celebrate the liberating potential of such an escape from the confines of the dominant text:

'In general, then, 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).

And others are more pessimistic, identifying ways in which the world wide web remains more hierarchical than hypertextual, more commercial than public, more closed than open (e.g. Joyce, 1998).

Conclusion

But all this is to anticipate the future. What should now be clear is that, throughout the latter half of the last century, in most industrialized countries, television has been a medium which has dominated and still does, for the moment at least, dominate our leisure hours, our national cultures, our domestic living rooms, and our modes of family life, all with a consistency and durability of reach and scale with which the media both preceding and following have not been able, and are unlikely, to compete (though interestingly, in non-industrialized countries, it remains radio which has the greatest reach). I have argued in this chapter that if research adopts a longer historical lens, we may begin to position our present theories of audiences in relation to actual audiences past and future.

We may then appreciate that to review contemporary audience research is to review a phenomenon unique to twentieth century industrialized nations, namely the dominance of mass broadcast television and, hence, the heyday of the mass television audience. Such an appreciation makes the case for comparative research, both historical and cultural, ever more compelling. As I have begun to indicate, the history of audiences is now beginning to be told, and it already shows clearly that audiences were not the same before and will not be the same again. Interestingly, both in looking back and in looking forward, it is already proving easier to investigate the contexts within which people use media-as-objects than it

is to identify the interpretive 'work' with which audiences engage with media-as-texts. In this sense, then, it is in understanding audience reception past and future that the greater challenge remains if we are to keep in focus both audiences as consumers of media goods and audiences as interpreters of symbolic mediations.

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Endnotes

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[1] I wish to thank Jay Blumler, Elihu Katz, Peter Lunt and Anghared Valdivia for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

[2] Objects of fandom change, of course, but at present Harry Potter, by J.K.Rowling, is the UK's top selling children's book (and, now, movie, game, website, merchandising theme, etc), and Manchester United is the top football (soccer) team). Barbie, however, is timeless.