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Book section

Original citation:

Originally published in Livingstone, Sonia and Das, Ranjana (2013) *The end of audiences?: theoretical echoes of reception amid the uncertainties of use*. In: Hartley, John, Burgess, Jean and Bruns, Axel, (eds.) *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*. [Wiley-Blackwell](#), Oxford, UK, pp. 104-121. ISBN 9781444332247

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Available in LSE Research Online: October 2014

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Original citation:

Livingstone, S., and Das, R. (2013) The End of Audiences? Theoretical echoes of reception amidst the uncertainties of use. In J. Hartley, J. Burgess and A. Bruns (Eds.) *Blackwell Companion to New Media Dynamics* (pp.104-121). Oxford: Blackwell.

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

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The Death of the Audience?

The report of my death was an exaggeration.

(Mark Twain, 1897)

Once, ordinary people occupied much of their leisure time sitting on the sofa, often together with others, watching prescheduled hours of mass broadcast television or reading a national newspaper, whether in a concentrated or distracted manner and, later, talking about it over supper or the next day. Today, people gaze at their computer or mobile phone screen, often alone, while multitasking social networking, music downloading, chatting, searching for information, or playing games and, simultaneously, discussing their experiences with others elsewhere. Just a couple of decades divide these two time periods, hardly time for people to change in their fundamental interests and concerns. Yet their everyday habits – and their communicative possibilities – are considerably altered, reflecting the historic shift from mass to networked society, from push to pull media, from one-way to multiway communication. So, are they still audiences? In this chapter, we argue that this question matters: conceptualizing people as audiences (not instead of but as well as publics, masses, consumers, or users) builds insightfully on the history of audiences and audience research to reveal continuities and changes in the mediation of identity, sociality, and power.

We ask this question about audiences at a time of change, aware that the nature of this change is widely contested. Is society dramatically different or just a little different from a decade or several decades ago? Or, are the continuities across decades or even centuries far more telling? Our argument is that, in relation to people's engagement with media and, more importantly, in relation to people's engagement with each other through media, the changes

are indeed noteworthy; but this does not mean that the conceptual repertoire best able to analyze them must be entirely new. On the contrary, we pursue the possibility that the critical repertoire of ideas and insights developed to rethink the mass television audience in the 1980s and 1990s – a repertoire that challenged the often presumed passivity and mindlessness of our opening image – is only now coming into its own, only now finding sufficient scope, in the multimodal, converged digital environment, to reveal its full analytic power and potential.

Audience studies asked how people converge and diverge in making sense of media texts, how people respond critically to dominant messages, and how audiences participate in civil society. Today, in a networked moment of multimodal and user-generated media, similar questions arise about practices of reading, writing, and interpretation, and about the consequences of such practices for inclusion or exclusion, acceptance or critique. Though some may be surprised to see audience researchers defending the text, we assert that these questions are, crucially, tied to the continued importance of texts. As we explore in what follows, only through recognition of the mutuality of texts and readers can we analyze the age of digital networks, as we did that of mass broadcasting.

Today we are witnessing an explosion of texts and technologies – everything is digital, everything is mediated. Urban spaces especially are covered in physical messages – commercial, political, persuasive, or merely graffitied. More and more, they are experienced also through digital messages – increasingly annotated by geo-located systems of representation, while co-located face to face interactions have been remediated by the constant flicking of one's eye to a mobile screen, by our permanent availability to absent others, and by the imagined ear of the digital bystander. Whether we are working or at leisure, studying or playing, being sociable or private, or contributing to community life, we are surrounded by a cacophony of messages, voices, signs, and images – many of which we are simultaneously responding to or circulating onwards to others. Meanwhile, the politics of representation has reached the top of public and policy agendas worldwide (Orgad 2012), unsurprising given late modernity's fascination with life political movements, the fraught struggles over religious and cultural politics, and the widespread marketization of party politics. Just as we are surrounded by texts that hail us on all sides, so too are we embedded in an explosion of technological artifacts for information and communication, with ever larger screens on our buildings and public spaces, ever newer gadgets in our living rooms and bedrooms, and ever smaller ones in our pockets, under our pillows, beneath our thumbs, and plugged into our ears.

This doubly articulated nature of media and communications – as both text and as object, or as medium and as message (Silverstone 1994; Livingstone 2007) – doubly articulates the audience also. On the one hand, audiences (re)produce meanings by negotiating the mutual interface of text and reader. On the other, audiences (re)produce social relations by negotiating the material/social determinations that structure their everyday contexts of action. The former articulation foregrounds questions of interpretation. These have long been theorized via semiotics and reception aesthetics, sometimes framed in terms of literacy; and, in today's complex media and communications environment, further questions of interpretation arise – about navigation and search, about trust and reliability, about

knowledge and creativity. Additionally, the latter articulation raises questions of social relations. These have long been theorized via macro/micro relations of political economy versus cultural ethnography, sometimes framed in terms of system and lifeworld; and, in today's complex and globalizing society, further questions about social roles and relations arise – audiences and publics, producers and producers, citizens and consumers are converging and diverging in parallel with the media texts and technologies with which they engage.

To be sure, in practice, the texts and technologies of today's media environment are interacting, further complicating matters, as the one can no longer be mapped neatly onto the other (programs on television, films at the cinema, books in print form, etc.). Content spans diverse media, platforms connect and converge (see Jenkins, 2006), and brands transcend even the bounds of media – as in *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* the book (original and spoof), film, game (computer and board), website (official and fan), duvet cover, and Lego toy. However, these empirical interconnections need not undermine the value of the analytic distinction between semiotic and material articulations of audiencehood. Further, the vitality of recent decades of research on audiences, which for a while electrified the wider field of media and communication, lies, we suggest, precisely in the creative bridging of these very different approaches. Whether scholars root their work primarily in the social semiotic, reception-aesthetic, encoding/decoding, critical, anthropological, feminist, or any of a range of other trajectories, most recognize that both approaches are needed, even when (or because) their articulation generates friction. Audiences are always situated, and situate themselves, between text and context; and, although much is indeed changing in the mediated environment, people's relation to and through media remains doubly articulated. Thus, they have always required and will continue to require a dual lens from those who seek to understand them.

But, for some, the concept of the audience is no longer useful. Indeed, the phenomenon itself is claimed to be obsolete, or at least disappearing (Jermyn and Holmes 2006), most famously in Dan Gillmor's (2006) claim in "We the media" that "the former audience" is making the crucial shift, enabled by networked technologies, from consumer to citizen, and also in Jay Rosen's (2006) celebration that "the people formerly known as the audience" are at last claiming the producer power that (technologically) enhanced opportunities for speech surely afford – as well in the work of a host of academic scholars. Whether such activity equates to the high standards society holds for its citizens and publics (Butsch 2000; Dayan 2005) or whether it indeed brings the power to match or challenge that of the major media owners, remains rightly disputed (Jenkins 2003), generating many empirical projects recently and currently underway. Setting aside the wealth of evidence that reports of the audience's death are exaggerated (for television viewing figures are holding up, cinema audiences are growing, few could live without their TV set, and radio remains the world's most enjoyed medium), we are more interested here in the validity (or otherwise) of the theoretical claim.

In "Not Dead Yet?" Elizabeth Bird (2009) observes that digital media enable the externalization of much audience activity – from silent responses to visible practices of interpretation. And, as one of this chapter's authors has previously noted, now that people

make visible their role in the (re)production of meaning by searching, clicking, typing, moving, and merging text, the activity of the audience can surely no longer be in doubt (Livingstone 2004). Yet such new activities have, contrarily, precisely been used to confirm the comparative passivity of earlier times. According to some new media enthusiasts, the more the internet user is seen to do, the more passive the television viewer appears with the benefit of hindsight. So, not only is the audience now dead, say some, but by comparison with the vivid life of the digerati it was never very much alive – a new twist to the much-recounted critiques of the (supposedly) over-celebrated active audience (e.g., Morris 1988; Seaman 1992; although see Hartley 2006).

While for both theoretical and empirical reasons, as hinted in the foregoing, we are convinced of the continued importance of audiences our present focus is different. For our question is not really whether audiences still exist (it seems evident to us that they do) but, rather, whether it is illuminating to analyze the activities of people engaging with today's simultaneously converging and diverging media and communication environment by using the conceptual repertoire developed to analyze the mass audience (for an empirical approach to this, see Das, 2011; 2012). In other words, even if audiences are alive and well, it may not follow that users of digital and online technologies have anything in common with them. Indeed, for those who have arrived at the study of new media users from a completely different direction – from science and technology studies, human-computer interaction, sociology of consumption, history of literacy, library and information studies, or any of the other disciplinary trajectories now productively informing the multidisciplinary analysis of digital media (for instance, see Barjak et al. 2010; Kim et al. 2010; Kimmerle et al. 2010; Paul and Morris 2011) – the putative continuities between people watching television from the sofa and people using a computer via a mouse or keypad may seem tangential. However, for those of us asking what the audience researcher is to do in the age of the internet (Livingstone 2004), this is a challenge worth taking up.

A Cross-generational Dialogue

“You are old, Father William,” the young man said, “And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head – Do you think, at your age, it is right?”
(Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865)

As Lewis Carroll nicely observed, the older generation gains its white hair after a lifetime of argumentation and experience, but it may still surprise the younger generation. Yet, despite its association with power, white hair does not always generate respect; the younger generation may instead treat its elders with perplexity, critique, or disregard. Any teacher must, therefore, ask themselves: what do I have that is worth handing on to the next generation, and for how long will it hold its value before becoming irrelevant? Meanwhile, their students must ask themselves: what knowledge is on offer and how far can it take me in addressing new problematics, or must I start over? Thus, there is nothing new in this mutual questioning about the transfer or evolution of knowledge across generations and, for the six or seven decades of media studies' existence, several generations of communication scholars

have lived through overlapping technological, societal, and intellectual histories, contributing empirically and theoretically to the multistranded narrative of media studies in general and audience studies in particular. As Katz et al. put it:

It is in the workaday world of reading and writing and researching – inspired by predecessors and contemporaries – that we look over our own shoulders, sensing the presence of an ancestor, dimly discerned at first, who is cheering us on in the direction that we ourselves (so we think) have chosen. That is how we give birth to those whom we recognize as intellectual parents. And often, we find it worthwhile to get to know these parents better. (2003: 2)

We write this chapter from the perspective of two contrasting yet perhaps parallel generations of media scholars, each finding herself at the start of something new. For the one of us who “came of age” at the birth of active audience theory, the theoretical, empirical, and critical challenges directed to structuralist, literary, and semiotic accounts of texts as well as to political-economic accounts of media power by the new theorists of audience reception, cultural studies, ethnographic methods, and the feminist revalorization of the everyday – especially of women’s, working class, and marginalized voices – were decisive. For the one of us who is now “coming of age” at the birth of Web 2.0, decisive factors shaping the research agenda instead center on crossmedia convergence and hybridity, multidisciplinary debates over globalization and the network society, a fascination with the experiences of youthful “digital natives,” and a shift from critically working to undermine to critically engaging with the normative agenda of policy-making.

To be sure, the older generation does not stand still, and in researching this chapter we have found it noteworthy that a number of scholars grounded in the field of television audience reception have taken on the analysis also of how people engage with new and digital media. Knowing that some of their (our) peers from earlier times have not made this same move (instead, for example, extending their path further into cultural and media anthropology or staying with television studies), and now finding ourselves also in new company (with technologists, educators, historians, and political scientists, among others), it seems that many audience researchers may be asking themselves what they can usefully bring from the former to illuminate the new research agenda. Every time we conduct a literature review, build a theoretical framework, design a course curriculum, or critique the work of others, these questions becomes pressing: how far back should one reach into the history of the field, to what effect, when is it time to let go, and what new analytic tools might instead be needed?

One starting point lies in the meta-narratives that retell the contribution of audience reception studies. Without rehearsing, or taking time to contest, the stereotypical narrative (the trouncing of the “hypodermic needle” of effects research; the canonical trio of Radway, Ang, and Morley; the discovery of unfettered polysemy and the uprising of the actively resistant audience), it is worth pausing to reflect on what did emerge from that “new and exciting phase in so-called audience research” (Hall 1980: 131). 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).

First, audience reception studies revealed that audiences' readings could not be predicted from knowledge of the text alone, which undermined the analyst's authority in presuming a singular, underlying meaning of any media text by demonstrating that empirical readers often do not mirror the expectations of model or implied readers – far from it, they can be playful, critical, creative, or plain contrary (Liebes and Katz 1993). Second, this enabled cultural and ethnographic explorations of empirical audiences (plural) that – far from opening the door to unfettered polysemy or radical resistance – emphasized that interpretation is situated in specific, structuring, social contexts that, however, may undermine totalizing claims of media imperialism and dominant ideologies with evidence of counterflows and “glocalization” (Tomlinson 1999). As Morley comments acerbically, “these models of audience activity were not... designed... to make us forget the question of media power, but rather to be able to conceptualize it in more complex and adequate ways” (2006: 106). Third, close attention to the contextualization of media reception in everyday life identified not only the reproductive power of social stratification and forms of structured inequality but also the ways in which microtactics of appropriation reshape and remediate media texts and technologies, it being through such contingent processes of mediation that universalizing accounts of passive audiences and powerful media effects are contested.

These three insights concern, in essence, the audience's role in meaning-making, the structuring importance of context, and the potential of agency. Together, they find their mutual connections within what Richard Johnson (1986) called the “circuit of culture” or what others, more recently, frame in terms of theories of mediation or, looked at historically, mediatization (see Krotz 2007). In this way, audience reception studies contribute to understanding the wider significance of everyday processes of interpretation, thereby also bringing audience researchers into dialogue with a wider array of disciplines – for example, the civic potential of audiences (as citizens or publics) engaging with the mediated public sphere (see Butsch 2000; Dahlgren 2003; Livingstone et al. 2007); the contested balance between creative and commodified conceptions of audiences (as consumers or markets or producers or produsers (Bruns 2008)); and the contribution of people's daily, local media practices to processes of globalization and transnational flows (here audiences are conceived as communities, whether cosmopolitan, local or diasporic (Aksoy and Robins 2000; Georgiou 2001; Dayan 2005)).

These debates are, surely, still current, so that the insights of audience reception studies need not be tied to a now-obsolete social/mediated context. At the same time, new questions are also pressing. People's relation with media is shifting from the predominance of one medium, television, to embrace the simultaneously diversifying and converging technologies that define the new media environment, extending Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) dispersed audience to the point where it is no longer sensible to ask whether or when people are part of an audience, only when and why it is useful to focus on their audiencehood (or, as Fiske (1992) proposed, on their “audiencing” – thereby substituting a verb for the noun so problematically appropriated by the industry (Ang 1996)). Also important is the

transcendence of a once-strong boundary between mass and interpersonal communication to a world of multiple forms of networked communication blurring complex, quasi-, hybrid, and peer-to-peer forms of communication in addition to – and therefore now remediating (Bolter and Grusin 1998) – the more familiar one-to-many and one-to-one communication modes that have defined and separated mass and interpersonal communication research. Yet even these are shifts that have taken place over decades, not radical changes introduced by the advent of the mass internet, encouraging us to pursue the promise of conceptual continuities further, as below.

Conceptual Continuities

As he composes his thoughts in words, a speaker or writer hears these words echoing within himself and thereby follows his own thoughts, as though he were another person. Conversely, a hearer or reader repeats within himself the words he hears and thereby understands them, as though he were himself two individuals.

(Ong 1962, cited in Farrell and Soukup 2002: 29)

The repertoire of concepts developed by audience researchers to understand people's interpretation of television and other media bears striking parallels with that which information theorists work with when analyzing the use of interactive and digital information. The inscribed users discussed by the latter remind us, as audience researchers, of sutured subjects; meanwhile, implied users echo implied audiences and ideal readers; the semiotics of links and nodes parallel the polysemy of televisual codes; technological affordances resemble preferred readings; communities of practice expand on interpretive communities; remix cultures extend recognition of playful or resistant readers; and, in both new and old media contexts, notions of genre organize texts and usage/reading practices. For example, when Steve Woolgar (1996), as a sociologist of scientific knowledge, discusses the "textuality of the artefact" along with "preferred" and "implied" users of information technologies, there are many parallels with the analysis of media texts and genres, and the preferred and implied readers, as discussed by literary reception-aesthetics theorist Wolfgang Iser (1980) and, later, the implied and actual viewers of audiovisual media (Livingstone 1998a). Thus, we see researchers reaching back for old concepts, refashioning them for this new digital era. Some hark back to the audiovisual age while others look further back, to the print era or even earlier, to rethink the analysis of face-to-face, oral communication for present times.

In extending the conceptual repertoire of audience reception analysis to the study of new media use, we propose as a core focus the interpretative interface between, and thus mutual definition of, texts and readers, along with a series of parallel pairings (depending on disciplinary origins and focus) as follows. The cultural studies approach to audiences begins with the dual moments in the circuit of culture brought to prominence by Stuart Hall (1980), namely encoding/decoding; this prioritizes the importance of codes and coding as a process embedded in material circumstances, generating a cycle of the production and reproduction of meaning with no linear start or end point. Others in audience reception studies draw on the literary theorists' pairing of text/reader (or, in screen studies and film theory versions,

text/spectator), notwithstanding that in practice the analysis more often focused on texts and implied or ideal readers than empirical readers (although see Holland 1975; Staiger 2005). Both the foregoing were strongly influenced by semiotics, the cultural studies approach also encompassing the power dimensions (dominant and resistant) of mediation while the literary approach engaged more with questions of textuality (and inter- or extra-textuality), as well as textual quality (high versus low culture) and type (or genre). The concept of audiences, then, encompasses half of each of these paired terms – encoding, reading, spectating, and so forth. As argued above and elsewhere (Livingstone 1998b), the “thingness” of the audience is misleading (as Ang 1991 elegantly captured in *Desperately Seeking the Audience*) for the noun merely stands in as shorthand for the verbs that account for the textually/technologically mediated communicative processes that connect people.

However, these pairings are paralleled in science and technology studies by the pairing of affordance/user and, relatedly, in material consumption studies by production/appropriation, both approaches now being applied to digital media studies. This circumvents assumptions of technological determinism and passivized consumers just as, in audience studies, conceiving of the interpretative relations between text and reader circumvents assumptions of powerful media effects and vulnerable audiences while, in both cases, refusing a naïve celebration of agency. As Ian Hutchby put it, “affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action” (2001: 44). Or, as Woolgar says, in a manner reminiscent of Hall’s writing on the preferred reading (or the previous, literary notion of the intended address of a message), “certain features of the structure and design of the artefact make certain interpretations and uses more likely than others. By way of textual analysis one can discern, in particular, which sorts of readers are implied by the text” (1996: 580) and, thus, “notions about the ideal user tend to get built into the design of a technical artefact” (581). This is particularly intriguing when now analyzing how people (users) operate in a peer-to-peer environment – collaborating to rewrite the texts that they and others experience. And unsurprisingly, given the history of audience reception studies, we would advocate that such analysis includes empirical research.

Last, we note a pairing from the world of information and education studies originating several centuries ago (Luke 1989), that of literacy and – to coin a term, legibility. Although newly salient in the age of hypertextual and online media, the varying literacy demands of different media interfaces – oral, print, audiovisual, networked – have long been debated (Farrell and Soukup 2002), ever since that very first communicative pairing of speaker/hearer, from which much communication theory stems and to which, in an age of the rediscovery of peer-to-peer communication, many theorists now return (Goffman 1981; Kress 2003). Spanning all communicative modes, whether mediated by communication technology or the affordances of the human body (Jensen 2010), the concept of literacy makes us ask: what does the reader or user (or hearer) bring to bear on the process of interpretation, and what are the conditions of capability (that resource their literacy) and legibility (as designed into the media environment) that enable literacy?

As with our other pairings, the notion of literacy implies a text to be read, raising questions of legibility – what interpretations are afforded, what knowledge is expected, what possibilities

are enabled or impeded? The case may also be made in reverse – the more complex or, especially, the more “illegible” (or hard to read or decode) the text or media environment, the greater the task of media literacy. On this account, many new digital interfaces should be understood as illegible (ill-designed, non-user-friendly, possibly deliberately obscure or deceptive); only as literacy develops and, one hopes, as the text/technology is redesigned responsively, can literacy and legibility achieve a tolerable balance. The focus on legibility, together with the recognition that literacy is culturally and historically conditioned, not simply a matter of individual cognition (Scribner and Cole 1973; Snyder 2001), foregrounds a critical perspective long important to audience research.

Indeed, since the concept of literacy applies across all modes of communication, it is arguably a more securely political concept than audiences or readers or users. Literacy has long been linked to the politics of emancipation (think of the evident inequity in the concept of illiteracy, whereas not being part of an audience generally matters little). Now that knowledge, participation, citizenship, resistance, self-determination, and much more are all mediated (Livingstone 2009), the normativity inherent in the concept of literacy becomes valuable. Researchers are now, rightly, asking not only what do people know or understand or do in relation to the digital media environment but also what should they know, understand, and do, and who should take responsibility, or in whose interest is it, if they do not?

All of the foregoing involves a rejection of that traditional pairing in media and communication research, namely stimulus and response. Although prominent in the psychological tradition of media effects research, it eschews any notion of interpretation – the meaning of the stimulus is given, there is no semiosis, and thus the response is contingent only on circumstances, not on meaning (Livingstone 1998a). Instead, we emphasize the remarkable similarities in terms of relationships of co-construction across different fields. Each foregrounds a paired concept in which each element in the pair defines, shapes, resources, and constrains the other in a (generally unequal) struggle over meaning and power. Together, each pair marks out the interpretative “contract” that holds the elements together – text and reader, for instance, are mutually specified in terms of the “expectations” each embodies regarding the other and neither has meaning without the other. Take, for example, the soap opera and the soap opera viewer: the generic conventions of the text are thoroughly understood by their long-standing viewers – consider the cliff-hangers that gratify rather than frustrate (though if found at the end of a detective drama or when seen by a novice viewer they would indeed frustrate) precisely because it is understood that the gap is left for interpretative readers to fill, individually and together, before the next episode moves the narrative onwards. Or, to take a new media example, consider the social networking site and its users: again, the generic conventions of the text are thoroughly understood by their users who do not, contrary to the misunderstandings of nonusers, abandon all norms of privacy but rather reclassify their friends, their images, and their experiences according to the proffered tools of distribution and display, simultaneously providing the feedback by which the site then adapts the tools it offers.

The Short History and Long Past of Audiences

As the pioneering experimental psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus (1908) said of psychology a century ago, it “has a long past but only a short history.” In other words, the formal history of a discipline does not capture the long past of thinking, theorizing, and reflecting on a field. It certainly does not capture the long past of the phenomenon – in our case, audiences – itself. For audiences were not discovered in the 1980s, despite the attention attracted by Stuart Hall’s exciting new phase of research. Nor did they originate in the importance of television for the postwar 1950s celebration of the nuclear family in the living room (although, as Stephanie Coontz (1997) eloquently argued, what she calls the 1950s family experiment certainly shaped both popular and academic values regarding domesticity and belonging). Nor, even, were the Payne Fund studies the beginning of audiences, though the history of their analysis is rarely traced back further. Rather, as Richard Butsch’s (2000) history of the making of the American audience vividly illustrates, the long past of audiences is likely as long as that of human communication itself, certainly predating the mass media. Their longevity, and the diversity of forms and focus that characterizes their history, gives the lie to their supposed present-day fragility – the internet is no more killing off audiences than did television replace reading or cinema destroy the art of conversation. Rather, changing social and technological conditions drive the evolving contexts within which people engage with and through media and, therefore, they also drive the ever-new (yet often strangely familiar) claims about the status and significance of audiences.

At present, the language of users rather than audiences holds sway, however, leading us to observe that one benefit of bringing the legacy of audience reception studies to a new generation of scholarship is to caution against repeating old mistakes. Recall that audience reception theory was originally developed precisely to counter the reduction of audiences to instrumental media users (as in the functionalist theory of uses and gratifications (Blumler and Katz 1974)). Although pragmatically we bow to commonplace adoption of the terms “use” and “user,” analytically we insist that this is an unfortunate reductionism that misses two vital dimensions of audiences that are precisely worth preserving in a digital age. First, notwithstanding the explosion of texts and textuality already observed, in the double articulation of media and communication processes, the concept of “use” recognizes no texts, only objects. People use objects to do things, yes, but they interpret texts, simultaneously changing the text and themselves – or, as Iser put it, “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” (1980: 106). Second, users are resolutely singular, and though they can be aggregated they cannot encompass the collectivity captured by “audience” (and by its contrasting alternatives – public, mass, crowd, market). Thus, the properties of collectives, and any (often rather unpredictable) power that thereby accrues, is missed by a reductively individual level of analysis.

Perhaps the very banality of the concept of use permits the easy assumption that users need not be studied empirically. Undoubtedly, there is a plethora of descriptive studies charting the nature of digital media uses. There is also, more interestingly, a host of studies tracing the significance of such use in diverse domains (education, family life, intimate relations, political participation, and so on). But there is surprisingly little on the processes of meaning-

making involved: oddly, the more researchers contextualize people's engagement with screens in ever wider social spheres, the less subtle is their appreciation of the complexities of engaging with what is on those screens (Livingstone 2007). In terms of Silverstone's double articulation of media and communications, the material is displacing the semiotic, leaving only a single articulation of power and process to be unpacked and thus a less rich critical analysis. In a manner reminiscent of the Screen theorists, political economists, and anxious policy-makers of old, we are again hearing homogenizing, dismissive, patronizing, or just taken-for-granted claims about what people (audiences, users) do or think or understand about new media. Has it been so quickly forgotten that the analyst's interpretation of the text (the game, the webpage, the social networking site) may not accord with that of the user, and that decoding the layers of meaning is always context-dependent? An audience perspective insists on including the phenomenological experience of living in a mediated society, not least because empirical work with people as audiences readily surprises or contradicts established assumptions while revealing other, often marginalized, phenomena. Thus, the mere act of going out to speak to the people one is speaking on behalf of can generate critical knowledge (Hartley 2006).

But these are debates within the short history of media research. What of that longer past? In Table 1 we identify four different and yet intriguingly parallel moments of mediation that reveal not only continuities and changes but also, more interestingly, occasional but crucial returns. While the modal change is distinctive and new (notwithstanding the presence of multimodality in many printed texts and the monomodal nature of countless web interfaces), the change in social relations reflects a return in the digital age to that which preceded the age of mass broadcasting. So, networked communication only appears distinctive in addressing niche audiences by comparison with the mass media it follows, but this is far from novel in the longer history of communication. In other words, it is less the present than the preceding 50 years that requires a distinctive explanation in this regard (Katz and Scannell 2009).

Networked media, however, are more complex in both modality and legibility than any previous form of communication. In terms of the criteria prioritized in our analysis, they offer the richest array of communicative possibilities in human history. Other parallels are also evident. As for oral communication, broadcast communication's reliance on audiovisual modes of communication renders it immediately accessible. Indeed, the literacy requirements of today's complex and often illegible media environment are, more like those of the early days of print than of the broadcast era (radio and television), highly demanding of their reader/viewer/user. This necessitates new efforts to increase and support literacy – from the state, civil society, and the media themselves. While in the eighteenth century, the spread of mass literacy was enabled by the birth of the school (Luke 1989), in the twenty-first century, digital literacy is again demanding considerable institutional efforts, this time underpinned by the normative turn in the academy (e.g., Hobbs 2010). The risk – as for print but not so much for oral or audiovisual literacy – is that without such institutional efforts, illiteracy perpetuates and extends social inequality.

Table 1 reveals both continuities and transitions across differently mediated communicative conditions. The continuities are considerable, enabling the comparison of communicative

conditions over time and place in terms of their technological affordances, textual conventions, and practices of use. Although each set of conditions is distinctive to its particular context, all can be theorized in terms of complex relationships of mutuality and co-construction of meaning between the interpreter and that which is interpreted. As we have emphasized, this is variously theorized in terms of texts and readers, affordances and appropriation, legibility and literacy, technology and use. Each element in these pairs defines, shapes, resources, and restrains the other. Thus, guided by the continuing relevance of analytic concepts from reception studies in the age of networked media, in this chapter we have proposed that this conceptual repertoire holds much promise for the empirical study of people's engagement with diverse forms of new media. One reason that we have urged the extension of concepts from reception studies is that claims about "users" – made within and, especially, beyond the field of media and communications (e.g., in literacy and education studies, information systems, human-computer interaction, and cybernetics, and across the social sciences) – are often speculative or based on descriptive more than critical or theory-led research.

But it is the transitions that gather most attention during the intellectual, empirical, and public debates surrounding the move from audiences to users, or from mass to converged media. And, to understand these changes, it may well be that the field of media and communications has much to learn from the other fields that border it, especially insofar as they theorize users, in one way or another. For example, literacy studies have a strong focus on questions of textuality, visuality, authorship, learning, and writing; information systems bring perspectives on organizational procedures, software, hardware, and data processing; and human-computer interaction focuses on the exchange between the user and a technical interface, noting problems, errors, and inconsistencies. Interestingly, these fields tend not – unlike the attitude toward audiences within media and communications – to denigrate or marginalize the importance of readers or users. However, we can retain from media and communications research its well-developed analysis of cultures and subcultures, of power (in relation to gender, ethnicity, and other forms of identity), of the political economy of media organizations and networks, and much more. Media and communication more than other fields, it seems, emphasizes the significance of, or unexpected responses and divergent interpretations of, audiences (in all their forms), in turn forcing a careful examination of the particular contexts within which people engage with media.

Conclusion

We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation. This process is steered by two main structural components within the text: first a repertoire of familiar (literary) patterns and recurrent (literary) themes... ; second, techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar.

(Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 1974: 289)

Faced with a sense of radical change in the media environment, this chapter has argued for the continued need for a theory – and the continued validity of the theory developed for audience reception of television – to understand how people engage not only in terms of motivation, choice, or habit but also in semiotic terms, whether accepting, creative, or critical, with media texts old and new. This should help today's generation of researchers of new media avoid the mistakes made by their predecessors when researching older media. For, already, today's researchers are grappling with some familiar problems. Research once 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 that shape that engagement. And we are witnessing the inadvertent return of the singular, closed authoritative text (and text analyst), forgetting the insight that texts (online and offline) are subtly open to multiple interpretations and leave gaps for users to fill, preferring instead readings that shape users' responses (Burbules 1998).

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, in which MySpace and Wikipedia and *Second Life* are 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 whose heterogeneity is merely idiosyncratic or to be explained solely by social determinants (everyone responds as dictated by their circumstances). But it does not allow for diverse modes of engagement in which the very meaning of the text is realized only in the act of interpretation – in Eco's (1979) terms, of actualization, as today's readers pass through digital texts (Fornas et al. 2002). Hence, few studies reveal multiple *readings* of digital texts, either implied by a polysemic text or as shown among empirical users. Some scholars even appear content, as before audience reception studies, to analyze online spaces with no reference to audiences or users at all, reducing people to subjects and losing sight of both agency and context. At this point, then, we rest our case that there is much to learn from the previous generation of audience reception and interpretation.

Although presented in the traditional mode of linear print, this chapter was born out of the more fluid and interactive exchange that Ong captures in the quotation above. It sought to celebrate the conversations across as well as within generations of scholars who, with Iser, are constantly looking back and looking forward in order to orient themselves to the present, necessarily retelling what has gone before in order to anticipate what might be to come. Thus, we have revisited the conceptual repertoire from audience reception studies in order to explore the continued relevance of these debates in the age of new media. First, we argued for retention of the co-constructionist text–reader relation or interpretative contract, for it has proved illuminating in parallel manifestations across diverse disciplines. The text–reader metaphor, especially when grounded in reception aesthetics (Iser, , Eco) brings with it many other concepts of value to the networked age – consider open and closed texts, horizons of expectation, gap-filling, wandering viewpoints, and communities of interpretation. Moreover, while seemingly micro in their ambitions of investigating meaning at the interface of readers

and texts, this approach connects also to a macro level of analysis, for it bridges structure and agency in a dialectic relation that considers not only resources but also constraints, and it contextualizes the circuit of culture within wider society in a manner that privileges neither one nor the other of texts and readers in its critical examination of how the relations between people at all levels are increasingly and ceaselessly mediated. Rather, it observes the continued relevance of texts and readers or audiences in today's world, and it thus urges that scholars continue to learn from past insights in recognizing, appreciating, and standing up for the contribution and interests of ordinary people in the digital, networked age.

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Table 1 Evolving cultures of communication

| <i>Dimension</i> | Oral | Print | Broadcast | Networked |
|---|--------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Interpretative pair (communication at the interface)</i> | Speaker/hearer | Text/reader | Encoding/decoding | Affordances/ user |
| <i>Modality (of the text/ technology)</i> | Multi/situated | Mono | Audio/visual | Multi/distanciated |
| <i>Structure (of the message)</i> | Linear | Linear | Linear | Hypertextual |
| <i>Social relations (among readers/ users)</i> | Niche/co-located | Niche/dispersed | Mass | Niche and mass |
| <i>Literacy requirements (of the reader/user)</i> | Low | High | Low | High |
| <i>Collective nouns (for people engaged in communication)</i> | Community; crowd; public | Citizens; public; readership | Audience; market; mass | Consumers; netizens; users |