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Existing and emerging audience research in the UK: a review for the Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies COST Action, August 2010

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Overview

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The story of audience research in the UK is often told in terms of a rivalry between two institutions, two men even – Stuart Hall, the inspiration behind the radical yet influential **Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies**, and James Halloran, architect of the key training ground for media researchers worldwide, the **Centre for Mass Communication Research** at the University of Leicester. Influenced by the legacy of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart with their shared yet different vision of importance of understanding the everyday practices associated with popular culture texts, as part of the critical analysis of the circuit of culture and influenced both by Marxist theory and by the visit to Birmingham from semiotician Umberto Eco, Stuart Hall (1980) gave his 'encoding/decoding' paper at Leicester to squash the 'administrative' uses and gratifications approach once and for all.

Although this was far from the end of **uses and gratifications research** world wide, Hall's approach effectively displaced both uses and gratifications research (the 'minimal effects' tradition), also spearheaded by Jay Blumler at the University of Leeds Institute for Communication research, and the experimental research on media effects - influential

in Germany, America and other countries - with which it, in turn, was in dispute (cf. the familiar adage, ask not what media do to people but what people do with the media). Ever since Hall's students (David Morley, Dorothy Hobson, John Fiske, Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, Paul Willis, and more) promoted **encoding/decoding** not only a theoretical framework but also as an empirical programme of research, audience reception studies have dominated audience research in the UK, with a significant influence also in Europe, America and elsewhere.

This is not to say that the **critical study of audience reception** is the only tradition in Britain – for studies of media effects, news comprehension, audience ratings and more have all continued. Nor is it to say that all who follow the Birmingham tradition have taken the same direction. But the attack on the authority of elite textual analysts to know the implied reader or sutured subject (cf. Screen Theory), the respect for the micro-tactics of everyday appropriation that forces recognition of marginalised voices, and the challenge to political economic theories of media imperialism by revealing reappropriation, counterflow, glocalisation and resistance to media power – all these remain a distinctive feature of British audience studies.

The present and future state of audience research, reflecting a very considerable diversification of, and deviation from, these early preoccupations, is the focus of the remainder of this essay.

Audience studies in the national subject conference, *MeCCSA*[1]

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Academic conference papers can provide a good and current overview of research in the field of media and communication. Looking at the last annual conference (6-7 January 2010) of the *Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association* (MECCSA), we see that audience studies in the tradition of media 'reception' or 'consumption' analysis does not feature as a major research agenda. Employing a **broader definition of audience studies**, viewing it as widely as possible –including those works that examine the changing role of audiences in news *production* – audience studies is still a small part of the overall programme.

Twenty-two papers (out of 166 papers, or 13%) in some way focussed on audiences, including seven that looked into the role of the audience in producing content online. Those examining **media consumption** focus on specific groups: transnational and diaspora audiences (3), young people (2), and fan groups (1). In the 48 sessions of the conference, eight papers (compared to 6 in 2009) and one panel ('Audiences and Media Representations') explicitly mention the word 'audience' in their title. Two papers provide us with a reflection on audience research, respectively reviewing the politics of music consumption research and revisiting feminist audience research. Last, two papers focus on methodological and conceptual considerations for examining audiences in the current mediascape, including considerations on media literacy.

Overall, there is **considerable diversity** in the papers presented at the annual UK conference in the field. However, audience studies seem to form only **a marginal part** of the programme, and within that only few provided a meta-analysis, discussing the future of audience studies or focussing on methodological innovations.[2] Perhaps not surprisingly, the largest category of papers dealing with the audience, looked at its role as

producers of content. However, given research suggesting that only few members of the audience actually actively produce media content (for a critical reflection, see van Dijck, 2009), we should consider whether this focus is at the cost of other ways of understanding audiences.

Audience research in the UK journal, *Media, Culture & Society*[3]

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If audience research is defined as research on t**he active, interpretive and sometimes critical work performed through engagement with the media**, then boundaries around what is to be included and what is to be left out, become difficult to draw. On the other hand, if one follows the trajectory of empirical audience reception studies – developed primarily around mass media although extended now into the age of the internet e.g. Livingstone, 2004, 2008) – then one can locate priorities around a shared conceptual **framework focused on interpretation, critique and resistance** and a value attached to empirical work with real, lived practices of interpretation among communities (as well as individuals). But, a review of the UK's premier journal, *Media, Culture and Society* shows few instances of these priorities, although 'the audience' continues to feature in the journal in conceptually and empirically significant ways. Notably –

- **Empirical research with audiences** continues to be valued in the journal. These range from research that focuses on the role of affect in elite audiences of financial markets (Davis, 2006), in depth empirical accounts of the social experience of cinema-going (Srinivas, 2002), media consumption practices of Asian women (Kim, 2010) to media consumption amongst alternative media audiences (Rauch, 2007)

- Audience research in the journal is **international**. Articles span a range of empirical locations from broadcasting audiences in Korea (Kim, 2001), to French radio audiences (Glevarec and Pinet, 2008), Indian metropolitan film audiences (Srinivas, 2002) and radio talk-back audiences in Australia (tebutt, 2006).

- The term 'audience' has been employed, conceptually and empirically, across **a range of media forms**. So, we find essays on mass media audiences, including radio, film (e.g. van Zoonen, 2007; Srinivas, 2002) and television (Kim, 2001), on user-generated content that link in some significant ways the active audience and the new media user (van Dijck, 2009) and on ways in which the mass of mass media audiences diverges from a new mass of new media users and their 'work' (Napoli, 2010), essays on alternative media audiences and readers (Downing, 2003) and articles that address the trans-media work done by audiences of trans-media drama (Evans, 2008).

- Significantly for **an interdisciplinary field** of research, the audience features in the journal in a diversity of formulations which ties it in with other field of research. We see the audience appear as publics – see for instance the sketch of media publics studied through fan letters written in response to a chat show (Ryfe, 2007), as participants in the media (e.g. Griffen-Foley, 2004; Lunt and Stenner, 2005), as consumers in a changing market (Glevarec and Pinet, 2008) as well as the politics of being measured within markets (Tudor, 2009), as classed – for instance as traced through working class writing and audience participation (Woodin, 2009), as working-class readers of ethnic media (Shi, 2009), or as people witnessing global suffering (Hoijer 2004).

- **Methodology** receives attention, especially in two recent articles. Wood (2007) proposes a new methodology of texts-in-action where co-viewing is studied in

parallel with the text to reveal the 'discursive potential of viewers' in interpreting the mass media. Buckingham (2009) argues for necessity to respond to the methodological and conceptual challenges posed by emerging trans-media environments.

A new UK conference, *Transforming Audiences*[4]

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Transforming Audiences (2007, 2009) is an international conference for audience research which takes place at the University of Westminster, London, every two years, showcasing British research alongside global trends. The conference attracts around a hundred speakers, chosen from twice as many proposals, indicating the vibrancy of this area. It asks the open ended question, **what is an audience?** This is a challenging question since audiences and publics constitute a diverse range of people watching, reading, listening, playing, making and re-making a multitude of media in society and culture. Audiences are not only associated with texts or artefacts, but also technologies, events, spaces and places, and social, cultural and political experiences.

The definition of **audiences as people, publics, viewers, users, participants, producers** has been explored in the conference presentations and keynote lectures – instances include the definition of audiences in policy documents (e.g. media literacy reports from regulatory bodies) or based on historical analysis (e.g. nineteenth century theatre goers or twentieth century radio listeners) or from empirical observation of young people's creative practices in new media environments. In these and other ways, participants have related media practices with the negotiation of identities, the consumption of news, political campaigning and notions of citizenship.

By enlarging the capacity of individual users to create and distribute content, blogs, content-sharing and social network sites are now challenging the clear-cut distinction between producers and consumers of content. Terms such as **'produsers' or 'prosumers'** have been devised to refer to this new type of user, but this theorization is far from complete. Rather than succumbing to technologically deterministic explanations, audience researchers' firm focus on people's everyday media practices offer a nuanced understanding of both change and continuity. Some scholars have drawn parallels between current practices with those of the past. Others have pondered on the meaning of interactivity, since interactivity does not always mean participation, participation is not always empowerment and empowerment does not always lead to social change. This depends on a number of factors, including skills and new media literacy, institutional arrangements and socioeconomic conditions, which enable some uses of media technologies while constraining others.

Theorising audiences is another theme. Researchers at *Transforming Audiences* adopt a made to measure approach emphasising multidisciplinary analysis - for example the use of social psychology and social theory to understand how audiences understand the genre of talk shows as part of ongoing debates about social and personal relations; or, the use of anthropology and cultural studies to explore the cultural practices of weddings. For researchers to critically analyse the genre of reality TV and popular audiences they need to use theories from documentary, social psychology, or politics and economics, alongside the sociology of emotions, or performance studies. For researchers to audiences as citizens, they require theories of civic engagement from political science

combined with anthropology and participant observation to elucidate people's engagement with news.

This **made-to-measure approach** to audience research seems vital in a media environment where new applications blur the boundaries between interpersonal and mass, private and public communication. In this way, research can examine the diverse forms of audience engagement as audiences create, remix, upload, and distribute content in ways that not widely available before. Since evidence shows that rather few people exhibit sophisticated multi-platform activity, a made-to-measure approach also aids investigation of the disengaged - those who for lack of resources, skills or interest are disconnected from such practices.

Special focus: radio audiences

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Although the UK community of radio researchers is relatively small, it should not be supposed that all audience research focuses on television and, now, new media. The **Radio Studies Network**, since January 2010 a network within the *Media, Communications & Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA)*, provides regular fora in which academics share their research and individual members are involved in national and occasionally international initiatives. An example is the current project researching on-line radio use, *Generations and On-line Media*, led by Paula Cordeiro in Lisbon, in which Guy Starkey at the University of Sunderland is a partner.

The UK radio industry funds **an official audience research body**, *Radio Joint Audience Research (RAJAR)*, under joint equal ownership of the public and private sectors respectively. This enables it to produce a single, largely uncontroverted 'gold-standard' survey of radio ratings, including demographic data and, increasingly, valuable reach and share data on platform use in the digital and analogue domains. The research carried out by RAJAR is quantitative, seeking to identify trends in radio listening, which stations are listened to, when, for how long and by how many individuals. Interestingly, a number of smaller-scale commercial broadcasters choose not to take part in RAJAR surveys, and the not-for-profit Community Radio sector is specifically excluded from it.[5]

UK radio broadcasting legislation is very much concerned with the **twin issues of quality and diversity** (HMG UK. 1991, 1996 & 2003). A few exceptions, the majority of non-BBC broadcast radio licences are awarded as the result of a "beauty contest" assessment process, under which competing applicants are judged in relation to the degree to which each meets a variety of licensing requirements, including content provision requirements attached (Ofcom 2008). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the current UK broadcast radio regulator, Ofcom (The Office of Communications), along with its predecessors (The Radio Authority and the IBA) conducted qualitative research over the years. Regulators need, for example, to know what content is likely to cause harm or offence, just as they need to understand the changing tastes and interests of the listening public in order to be proactively able to license relevant services. Broadcasters, however, are less interested in such qualitative research (although the BBC has carried out its own in-house qualitative research since as far back as the 1930s).

The UK's **Community Radio Sector** has been the subject of considerable research since its first experimental licensing back in 2002. Both the Radio Authority (Everitt 2003 & 2003(1)) and Ofcom (2004) have commissioned various qualitative research, with similar research being completed by DCMS (Goatley 2006), as well as a number of academics. In terms of content delivery, the sector is very heavily regulated to ensure its distinctiveness (HMG 2004). The weakness for the community sector is its lack of robust quantitative audience measurements: it knows why individuals listen but it lacks figures for the numbers of listeners it attracts. Some stations, such as Future Radio in Norwich, have been working with academics (Ward 2008 & 2010), also drawing upon previously published research, notably in Australia, to develop practical low-cost but statistically robust approaches to obtaining such information. It is hoped that over the coming months, this model will be finalised and made available to other Community Radio broadcasters, both elsewhere in the UK and in other parts of the world.

Conclusions: the diversity of audience research in the UK

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As this review of UK research on audiences reveals, there has been **a diversification in theories, methods, empirical focus and normative projects**, following the earlier division between cultural studies and effects research. Partly this reflects changes in the media and broader social changes: digitization is producing a plethora of radio and TV channels, changes in models of production from in-house production by major players to a diversity of smaller scale production companies, the development of commercial broadcasting and new media in the context of an increasingly global mediascape.

These changes have had a profound effect on the media available to audiences, modes and contexts of reception and content, which have had equally profound impact on academic audience research. In response, audience researchers are now rethinking the meaning of 'audience' itself. It seems to have become **an umbrella term** for a diversity of approaches rather than a paradigm that commits us to a particular world view or consensual approach. Below we note some of the "thousand flowers" of contemporary audience research.

Social theory and the media: four contributions led to new thinking about audiences:
- Thompson's *The Media and Modernity* emphasised the developing relationship between **reflexive** institutions and individuals, with the media so intertwined with the social that we should talk of **mediation**;
- Cultural sociologists; Abercrombie and Longhurst's conception of the **dispersed audience**;
- Silverstone's appropriation of the concept of **appropriation** from the sociology of consumption to analysis the **material conditions of everyday life**;
- Palmer's adoption of Foucault's ideas of media's implication in subtle processes of **social control and governmentality**.

The active audience: although much contested, this concept first challenged presuppositions in media and social theory about passive audiences and has since stimulated new lines of research:
- **Participation, public connection, the public sphere and civil society**, focusing on the increasing **visibility** of people in the media and how this links to changing

conceptions of political culture and the mediation of public life. It pushes forward the idea of **mediation** and the role of the media in political participation and public engagement, including the blurring with entertainment (e.g. fandom studies);

- **Audience ethnography** examines the dispersal (sometimes, the apparent disappearance) of audiencehood across the times, spaces and cultural practices of everyday life;
- **New media, mobility and audiencehood**, as audiences are carried yet further away from the screen into engaging with a mediated public life;
- **The phenomenology of audiencehood**, as theorised through the relation between audiences and **users**;
- **Popular culture**, a theme revitalised as new and interactive genres enhance audience involvement, participation and visibility;
- **Identity**, focusing on reflexive concepts of the self and the role of the media in identity work, especially in relation to cultural or ethnic diversity and diaspora or, contrastingly, the critique of identity can be seen as a site of social control through which "good citizens" are constructed and governed;
- **The regulated audience** – the growing connection between media policy analysis and audience studies in which the articulation of the public interest plays a critical role in understanding how public service broadcasting meets the changing needs of its audience and the role for the state in the relation between commercial and public service media..

There abundant ways of thinking about audiences and their relation to media, everyday life and social practice raises the critical question, is this a productive elaboration of audience studies as befits the changing nature of media, culture and society, or is this fragmentation beyond the point of a coherent field of study? This question returns us to Sonia Livingstone's introduction, for two themes that run through these elaborations of audience research are the possible interpolations of the social and the cultural through audiencehood and the difficulties of holding both of these conceptions together in an increasingly diverse but interconnected mediascape.

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Endnotes

[1] The Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association.

[2] Of course, this is only a snapshot of the work in the field, conducted on the basis of titles alone.

[3] Journal issues surveyed here span the period 2000-2101. See http://mcs.sagepub.com/ Note that in the past decade, the UK has also produced a successful journal, Participations, 'devoted to developing the broad field of study of cultural and media audiences'. See http://www.participations.org/index.htm

[4] See http://www.transformingaudiences.org.uk/

[5] See: http://www.rajar.co.uk/content.php?page=how_to_subscribe_stations (accessed 20/8/10).