



Introduction to the special issue 'Audiences and publics'

Sonia Livingstone

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For Journal of Media Practice

Sonia Livingstone

When is the media audience ‘the public’? This question raises fundamental issues about how audiences act, how they are addressed and whether they matter to the public sphere. To what extent and in what ways are publics becoming mediated? This question pinpoints growing concerns about how publics are influenced by the media, even dependent on the media. These questions can be asked the other way around. Which aspects of audiences are not usefully discussed in terms of publics? When are the media not relevant to questions of public or civic participation?

In the academy, discussion of audiences has long proceeded separately from discussion of publics. Each is theorized in a different disciplinary formation. Audiences are primarily studied in relation to media texts and everyday contexts, with questions about the possible civic or political significance of their interpretative and social responses only coming to the fore recently. Publics are typically studied in relation to sociological practices and political institutions, with concerns increasingly expressed on the relevance of the media, especially their potential for undermining the public sphere.

As part of the European Science Foundation’s *Changing Media, Changing Europe* programme, the present contributors, together with other colleagues (see Livingstone, forthcoming), have been meeting to discuss the changing relations between audiences

and publics – in terms of theory, policy and evidence. Our starting point is a mutual fascination with objects, events or spaces on the boundary between the once-separate discourses of audiences and publics, thus bringing to the fore empirical phenomena that are, precisely, ambiguous, hybrid and contested. We suggest that, far from tidying them away as messy and marginal, they should be examined as likely to suggest new ways in which people’s everyday engagement with cultural objects matters to the public sphere.

To some, it seems that audiences are on the rise while publics are in retreat. Instead, the contributors to this special issue argue that the distinction between audience and public is increasingly hard to draw, for binary thinking no longer fits either the subtleties of media forms nor the complexities of media power in late modern societies. Instead of trying to map audiences and publics onto such familiar oppositions as private/public or leisure/political or inconsequential/consequential, Daniel Dayan suggest that we focus on the process common to both audiences and publics, namely ‘the focusing of collective attention’. How is this achieved and under what conditions does it matter? Dayan widens the conceptual space to include not only audiences and publics but also spectators, crowds, communities, activists, militants and witnesses. These collective formations all rely on processes of imagination, including mediated processes, for their very existence, thus connecting the public sphere with the private experiences of individuals.

The following articles examine some of these ambiguous empirical phenomena situated on the borderline between audiences and publics. Dominique Mehl examines

the widely-discussed and apparently paradoxical situation in which people's most intimate, even taboo, thoughts and feelings are publicized to the nation in the talk show studio, creating, as she puts it, a subjectivized, individualized 'public sphere of exhibition'. This new 'public/private space' is populated not by experts but by the figure of the witness; it is no longer centred on the process of deliberation so much as on that of display; and the outcome is less the conclusion of an argument than an experiment in lifestyles. If the talk show is traditionally denigrated as emblematic of the improper publicization of private life (or, perhaps, the privatization of the public sphere), the news is traditionally valued as the primary way in which the media address audiences as citizens. Yet through detailed ethnographic work with audiences in Greece, Mirca Madianou uncovers diverse ways in which members of majority and minority groups (Greek, Greek Cypriot, Turkish-speaking) are positioned, cognitively and emotionally, often uncomfortably, by the public address of national and international news; indeed, for some, the result is a 'switching off', an audience ceasing to be part of a public.

Two further hybrid spaces are examined next, the child's bedroom and the communicative space of the mobile phone – the former, very private yet increasingly the locus for mediated public participation; the latter, very public yet widely used for mediating private communication. I distinguish in my article among three underlying dimensions along which public/private matters are often discussed, even confused, in academic and policy circles as well as in ordinary discourse: public sector/commercial; connected/withdrawn from public life; visible/hidden from the public gaze. Empirically, I then identify some of the ways in which these produce tensions in the everyday lives of children and their families as they come to terms with

the new media in their homes and bedrooms. Lastly, Kirsten Drotner analyses how mobile media are being used to create an individual and private experience within and across public spaces, both connecting and separating people and spaces. She argues that as the spatial and temporal boundaries of sociality become increasingly permeable, communicative connectivity is becoming more important than spatial context. She asks whether mobile communicators are, indeed, audiences and whether they are also 'portable publics', opening up new opportunities for civic or democratic participation.

In discussing our interests, the contributors have found it productive to position their work at the intersection between audiences and publics, drawing on the resultant tensions to examine anew the larger questions of communication, identity, citizenship, power and the every day. We thank the European Science Foundation and its *Changing Media, Changing Europe* programme for providing us with the opportunity to undertake this work. To offer any resolution would be premature but we hope to contribute to a wider discussion among and beyond the readers of the *Journal of Media Practice*.

Reference

Livingstone, Sonia (ed.) (forthcoming), *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere*, Bristol: Intellect Press.