From Spectators to Users: Exploring the Ongoing Transformation of Media Audiences

D’espectadors a usuaris: anàlisi del procés de transformació de l’audiència dels mitjans

De espectadores a usuarios: análisis del proceso de transformación de la audiencia de los medios

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Understanding audiences is essential to understanding contemporary media. Whilst the concept of the audience has a long past, it is never without controversy and its centrality has been debated since the consolidation of mass media in the mid-20th century (Lunt, 2009). Neither do academics own the concept of ‘the audience’ as broadcasters and policymakers have a need to know who is watching what when and their engagement and satisfactions with media. Audience studies within and outside academia was largely formed in relation to the linear media of mass communication, whereas digital media corresponds with a dispersal of audiences across many streams, channels and contents as media becomes embedded in and constitutive of everyday life. Where once the relevance of audiences to understanding media could be challenged in favour of political economy and production studies and a hard battle was won in establishing the importance of understanding audiences for television, film and radio, now the audience seem to fade from view as a dispersed set of uses and practices. Is the audience essentially linked to the idea of the public (Livingstone, 2005)?

This discontinuity of media technologies and audience practices challenges our understanding of audiences in significant ways. For example, over the history of audience studies, a key axis of debate has been between those who advocate the idea of audiences as formed or inscribed in media and those who claim that audiences are active in their interaction and reception of media. Influenced by early critical theory the audience is presented as a collection of fragmented individuals defenceless to commercial and political persuasion and that the only thing they have in common is the mass psychology of media manipulation. Audience studies stands in a complex relationship to such arguments as it both demonstrates media effects and the idea of the passive audience by portraying the audience’s capability to produce and reproduce meanings and actions using rather than being determined by media.

However, the notion of the audience as a spectator “happily” assuming a role limited to controlling his/her remote control. Whilst it may have once been
valid to explain our relation with media no longer seems the relevant issue on relation to the contemporary mediatized world (Livingstone and Lunt, 2014). A crowded landscape and a media-based society has turned audience into a more active entity, where everyone, under a fluctuating degree of consciousness, is taking, or is being forced to take, continuous decisions, leading to a fragmentation of that unknown collective “formerly known as the audience”, as Rosen graphically depicted. Yet, we argue, audiencehood is still relevant as a way of understanding contemporary media.

The audience, consequently, can only be realised, formulated and conceived as a complex theoretical conception and a new set of apparently contradictory trends and features need to be identified to understand contemporary modes of audiencing. As Sonia Livingstone suggested in a talk at an ICA Regional Conference in Lodz (Poland), innovation and tradition, commercial and public are only some of the oppositions that are needed to explain the audience and its role in media and communication Research.

This special issue brings together a number of papers that seek to examine and enhance these classic debates in audience studies in the context of the contemporary media landscape. A combination of articles in English and Spanish, the authors offer an examination of questions addressing the characterisation of the contemporary audience.

In the first article, David Mathieu proposes a study of new social media contexts in the light of reception analysis arguing that traditional approaches media audiences are still relevant to new mediated environments. Notions such as agency, structure, power, text and context remain invaluable to understand the social processes that take place through social networking sites. He questions the boundaries between old and new media and defends an integration of relatively new objects of study with those concepts and methods that have proven their value for several decades.

Sharing the SNS as its central scenario, the article “Ambient Journalism in Spain. How Twitter and NREs are redefining agenda setting in El País, El Mundo, La Razón, ABC and La Vanguardia” explores the relations between news production and news consumption, studying ‘ambient journalism’ in mainstream Spanish newspapers. Along with other papers in this special issue the paper deals with the implications of the transition of mass media contents to online platforms and the emergent strategies and tactics required to sustain their social and commercial presence. Anna Tous, Diana Rivero, Koldo Meso and Ainara Larrondo present the results of empirical research on five leading newspapers in Spain, identifying different audience engagement strategies in salient topics identified by most news outlets.

Following a similar line of argument, radio studies are also included in this Trípodos issue, as Xavier Ribes, Belén Monclús and María Gutiérrez present a content analysis of the calls for participation, both offline and online, made by Spanish radio broadcasters. The potential new opportunities for audience engagement with media contents is observed and resistance is identified and both the radio stations and the audience are seen as adapting active strategies in response to these changes.
Audience metrics is a field that is crucial to understanding media industry operations and to comprehend talk about audiences outside of the context of academic audience research. The article authored by Idoia Portilla explores potential connections between two worlds that traditionally have remained apart. From a market-oriented perspective, an updated review of TV audience measurement systems is presented, reflecting some of the technological and social challenges for both scholars and audience research companies in studying current TV consumption.

To conclude, a case study of the connection between the audience and a successful TV programme brings helps us to illustrate the strategies that media companies are developing in order to build up communities of viewers. Ana González and Natalia Quintas selected a talent show to explore the role played by the audience in the business model. The concept of social audience is presented as the outcome of all the strategies displayed by TV channels to boost audience engagement of viewers, turning them into active users of the diverse online spaces open to keep the TV content alive after having been aired. This article provides evidence about the ongoing transition experienced in the relation between TV products and viewers, leading to a convergent scenario where spectators are invited to become active participants in the process.

The papers in this special issue follow the path of the IAMCR Audience Section as well as the COST Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies and the Consortium on Emerging Directions on Audience Research (CEDAR). Across these networks of researchers, a stimulating collective project is emerging focused on updating the theoretical and methodological repertoires available to the scholars dealing audience research. The articles compiled here are examples of the potential of these emerging collaborations and new ideas about audiences in the digital age and we hope you will enjoy reading them as much as we did reviewing and editing them.

References


