Audiences, Media

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Abstract

In this article, the authors provide a historical overview of audience research spanning theoretical perspectives from the hypodermic needle model, the transition to British Cultural Studies, and on to postmodern conceptualizations. Applying an interdisciplinary lens, the article provides summaries of pertinent studies in anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology that explore how audiences understand, interact, and use media as part of their daily lives. In addition to the historical background, the article also explores specific subfields in new media, feminist, and global audience research. It concludes with insights into how the field is assessing new developments in social class and reality television.

The Beginning

The notion of audience has been largely derived from the image that media producers have of the actual, or the intended, people or groups of people that they imagine as the main recipients of their products. Media products – newspapers, television shows, films, radio broadcasts – are for the most part manufactured with the aim of capturing the attention of audience members. Often this interest is commercial – when media can capture the attention of particular audiences, their producers can sell this attention to various advertisers who may profit from this exposure. Scholars, therefore, are often rancorous in their disapproval of the commercial nature of the very concept of media audience.

Current audience research comes out of this tradition. At first, a 'hypodermic needle' model of media influence was prevalent among media scholars. This asserted that audience members were powerfully influenced directly by media exposure ('injected' with media 'messages,' so the metaphor goes). This model posited an essentially passive audience, and a media full of clearly understandable content with only one meaning.

This theory of powerful influence and simple media content was supplanted by the work of Paul Lazarsfeld in the 1930s. Lazarsfeld headed the Bureau of Applied Social Research, affiliated loosely with Columbia University, in the 1940s (he later became a professor of sociology at the University). Along with Elihu Katz, Lazarsfeld elaborated the minimal effects model in *Personal Influence* (1955). This work was a more general study of the influence of media on a variety of areas of peoples' everyday lives. It became famous for elaborating the 'two-step' flow model of the influence of media on the audience. Instead of directly and powerfully influencing people, Katz and the study confirmed the idea that media effects, rather than being powerful and evil, were actually for the most part rather minor and noninvasive, mediated through the more important effect of opinion leaders.

The limited effects model was influential in audience research throughout the 1960s. However, by the 1970s, this model was frequently criticized. For example, Todd Gitlin set forth a direct, vitriolic critique of limited effects theory generally, which has been widely read and cited (1978), and which had an important influence on audience research since. In this article,

he accuses Lazarsfeld, Katz, Klapper, and other limited effects theorists of misconceiving the problem of media effects. By conceptualizing an 'effect' too narrowly and concretely, Gitlin claimed that researchers missed many less-measurable ways in which the mass media influences its audience. Much of Gitlin's critique of the limited effects model has been picked up today by researchers studying the audience from a culturally contextualized perspective, influenced by anthropological and sociological methods. Nonetheless, the two-step flow model remains relevant in a variety of fields including advertising (e.g., Carr and Hayes, 2014), journalism (e.g., Farnsworth et al., 2010), and information sciences (e.g., Case et al., 2004). As Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) observe in their *meta*-analysis, in recent years, scholars addressing new media are drawing attention to the ways in which the dramatically expanded set of choices facing media audiences necessitate a reconsideration of the central theoretical premises of the media effects paradigm.

British Cultural Studies

The contemporary tradition of critical media audience analysis can largely be traced back to scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. Stuart Hall, David Morley, Angela McRobbie, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, and Roger Silverstone have all done work that looks at media audiences not as isolated phenomena, but as individuals and groups of individuals who must be studied in the context of the rest of their lives, and whose nature as a part of the media audience is only one segment of an overall set of cultural practices that characterize their identities. Also emphasized in cultural audience work has been the multilayered nature of texts as well as the complexity of how they are received.

Perhaps the first work to bring together textual and audience analysis from these new, critical perspectives was Stuart Hall's essay about television reception, entitled 'Encoding/Decoding in the Media Discourse' (1973). In this work, Hall theorizes both the complex nature of the meanings 'encoded' primarily in the television text, and the necessarily separate, but equally complex nature of the process by which viewers decode these messages. This seminal article paved the way for the more empirical audience studies which were produced in its wake by cultural audience researchers. Audience research carried out in

this tradition emphasizes overall the ways in which the media are part of culture, and concomitantly, the way in which audience reception of media is only one facet of the way an entire cultural system influences those who live within it.

David Morley's work has been particularly influential. He has authored two famous studies, *The Nationwide Audience* (1980) and *Family Television* (1986). In *The Nationwide Audience*, he looked at the way people of different occupations, social class statuses, and ethnicities interpreted a television news program differently. Even a supposedly 'objective' news show, he found, was open to different interpretations made by different types of audiences. In *Family Television*, Morley took the family locale of the television audience seriously. He and his research team went into the homes of families and both interviewed them about television and observed them watching it. Through this research, Morley was able to convey about the gender dynamics of the family audience for television. One of the phenomena he commented on was the way husbands rather than wives often commandeered the remote control, enabling them to make many of the family viewing decisions.

Morley's work, and the work of other cultural studies researchers, helped to shift scholarly thinking about the media audience from a scientific paradigm, which attempted to measure audience exposure and effects, to a more holistic one which looks at audiences in the context of their everyday lives. As a result of this paradigm shift, the impact of media on audiences became viewed as a broad phenomenon. Rather than searching for more narrow, measurable influences of media, cultural researchers began examining the narratives embedded within media, and looking at how these are interpreted and indeed adopted by audience members in the course of many activities in their lives. Audience research became less focused solely on 'audiences' per se, and has expanded to include the many uses of culture and media we all have in postmodern society. For example, in *The Export of Meaning*, Liebes and Katz looked cross-culturally at the ways in which audiences in different countries, and members of different ethnic and religious groups within each country, interpreted the same episodes of the prime-time soap opera Dallas, which had become a global phenomenon, being broadcast worldwide and achieving an avid following in many different national and cultural contexts. They found striking ethnic and religious group differences in how these audiences read the very same episodes of this popular television show. For example, Israeli Arabs and Russian immigrants were defensive about the American way of life pictured in the show, and attempted to shield their children from it, while others in cultures closer to that pictured read it more as nonthreatening, simple entertainment.

Third Generation Audience Research

The intellectual turn toward 'third generation' research with its focus on 'postmodern' audiences began in cultural studies during the late 1980s and, according to Pertti Alasuutari (1999), emphasizes that "… there isn't really such a thing as the 'audience' out there; one must bear in mind that the audience is, most of all, a discursive construct produced by a particular analytic gaze" (p. 6). However, the definitive statement regarding the place of the postmodern audience in media studies did not emerge until the mid-1990s when Ien Ang (1995) began promoting a critical ethnographic methodology in response to the theoretical needs created by the changing nature of media audiences. Echoing the conception of postmodernity recognizing reality to be an unstable proposition, Ang notes that the state of knowledge regarding television audiences is always in flux. She writes, "What matters is not the certainty of knowledge about audiences, but an ongoing critical and intellectual engagement with the multifarious ways in which we constitute ourselves through media consumption" (Ang, 1995: p. 52). Furthermore, she adds, "Acknowledging the inevitably partial (in the sense of unfinished and incomplete) nature of our theorizing and research would arguably be a more enabling position from which to come to grips with the dynamic complexity and complex dynamics of media consumption practices" (Ang, 1995: p. 67). This postmodern position slowly became the centerpiece of current conceptions of the audience.

Despite the diversity of empirical analyses associated with such work, three basic strains of reception research can be considered as third generation (Grindstaff and Turow, 2006). The first type of reception study attempts to understand the 'decoding' processes associated with television programming; Jhally and Lewis' (1992) *Enlightened Racism* examining audience reception of *The Cosby Show* is an example. They find that reception of the 'Cosby Show' varies with race: African-American viewers are largely ambivalent about the show because it challenges racial stereotypes while simultaneously displaying a standard of living out of sync with the material realities of the black audience, while white viewers are largely positive about the show because it reinforces the American myth of a meritocratic society and thus downplays the continued existence of structural barriers based on race. In *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*, Robin Means Coleman (1996) builds on the work of Jhally and Lewis by exploring the diversity associated with a qualitative examination of African-American reception of racially charged situation comedies. The data indicate that some African-Americans think mainstream society believes the representations on television create negative consequences for African-Americans, others think the representations of African-Americans have a positive impact, and others do not think there is a relationship between the representations of African-Americans and the perceptions of mainstream society. The second type of reception work is primary focused on the behavior and interpretations of television fans like Henry Jenkins' (1992) *Textual Poachers*. Borrowing Michel de Certeau's concept of 'poaching,' Jenkins vehemently rejects the dominant stereotypes of fans and shows that fans use material borrowed from popular media to establish subcultures. Jenkins continues this work and adapts his thinking to the new media environment in his more recent book, *Convergence Culture* (2006), which is discussed below.

The last type of reception research examines the consumption of media in the context of a larger social milieu. For example, Andrea Press and Elizabeth Cole (1999) use focus groups to examine the relationship between class subjectivity and the reception of television content. The study produces three important findings: (1) the discourse of pro-choice

middle-class women mirrors the discourse of prime-time television in which abortion is presented as appropriate for only the lower classes; (2) attitudes among pro-choice working-class women vary by class identification; and (3) class divisions are less important than shared beliefs among pro-life women. These findings indicate that the role of categorical identity in audience reception is more complex than previously believed. Similarly, in *New Media Audiences* (1999), Ellen Seiter uses a variety of qualitative methods to paint a more complex picture of the relationship between television and various segments of the American middle-class audience. In particular, Seiter (1999) asserts that middle-class individuals with lower levels of socioeconomic status and higher levels of educational attainment "cannot afford the luxury of indulging a love of popular culture, for fear that they will appear uneducated" (Seiter, 1999: p. 131). As the title of Seiter's (1999) book indicates, however, by the end of the twentieth century scholars were already beginning to confront 'new media audiences.'

New Media Audiences

Initially, theoretical work responded to traditional media's 'diversifying in form and contents' by interpreting new media audiences through a postmodern framework asserting digital technology only exacerbated existing trends making audiences 'less predictable, more fragmented, and more variable' (Livingstone, 1999: p. 63). Yet, rather quickly, many scholars began claiming that something was different about new media audiences. For example, in the influential *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins (2006) argues that contemporary audiences are now defined by their willingness to 'make connections among dispersed media content,' and, as a result, 'consumption has become a collective process' (pp. 3–4). Although Jenkins' theoretical work is widely regarded as significant, much of the earliest empirical research addressing new media audiences were largely guided by the belief that digital age inequality could be addressed through exclusively structural means like expanding fiber-optic networks to ensure the Internet access (for an excellent review of this research, see Livingstone, 2005).

More recently, however, the focus has shifted from issues of access to issues of usage and cultural engagement. Cross-national research examining the relationship between school-aged children and the Internet usage confirms that behavior tends to vary with socioeconomic location. For example, Sonia Livingstone's (2009) mixed-method examination of school children in the United Kingdom finds that for some "the internet is an increasingly rich, diverse, engaging, and stimulating resource of growing importance in their lives; for others, it remains a narrow and relatively unengaging if occasionally useful resource" (Livingstone, 2009: p. 57–58). Yet, access only explains some of the inequality created by new media. As Seiter (2005) notes in an ethnographic study of children and the Internet, closing the technology gap is an 'easier task to address than the wider and deeper deprivations' in society at large (p. 101). Even if access is unconstrained by economic concerns, audience behavior would remain stratified because the availability of the cultural competencies needed to interact with new media is related to socioeconomic status.

Research examining the relationship between young adults and new media finds similarly class-stratified engagement. In her research, Eszter Hargittai and her coauthors find that the tendency to accumulate cultural capital online is related to socioeconomic status using a variety of quantitative data. In a study examining the online behavior of individuals belonging to 18–26 years of age, for example, Hargittai and Hinnant (2008) observe that individuals with higher levels of education and those from materially privileged backgrounds use the Internet for 'capital-enhancing activities,' defined as the frequency with which individuals visit Web sites related to high-status Internet consumption such as political news, economic news, health news, stock prices, or travel information. Recent research addressing the use of social networking Web sites produces similar findings. For example, Danah Boyd (2011) examined the changing cultural preferences associated with the massive shift from MySpace to Facebook; she concludes by noting, "In some senses, the division in the perception and use of MySpace and Facebook seems obvious given that we know that online environments are a reflection of everyday life. Yet, the fact that such statements are controversial highlights a widespread techno-utopian belief that the internet will once and for all eradicate inequality and social divisions" (2011: p. 37).

Like Boyd, many scholars examining new media audiences reject the conceptual division separating mediated behavior from everyday practice. For example, in *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (2010), Nancy Baym argues that, rather than conceptualizing social cues as something lost when one moves from 'real' to mediated social life, they should be treated as variable; media providing more cues are considered 'rich,' whereas those providing fewer clues are considered 'lean' (2010: p. 9). This work is rather characteristic of empirical analyses of new media audiences in that a social constructivist approach is married with a soft technological determinism to acknowledge the innovative uses of new media and the tendency for existing social relations to be recreated online.

Feminist Audience Research

Feminist audience research now constitutes a sizable body of work with its own history, subfields, and criticisms. Feminist audience study began at the theoretical level with Laura Mulvey's seminal piece about film spectatorship, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), in which Mulvey challenged the notion that audiences unilaterally watch classical Hollywood film. Using the concepts of psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey develops the notion that a 'male gaze' dominates the spectator position in classical Hollywood cinema. Framing gendered audiences as distinct and worthwhile of separate attention pioneered decades-long discussion on the way women view and interact with media.

Later feminist audience analysis broadened Mulvey's discussion of female audiences by including both traditional media as well as specialized 'female' genres. One of the most influential authors to take 'women's media' seriously was Janice Radway. In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, she provided a powerful understanding of the way Midwestern women used romance novels, which like

much women's media had formerly been considered too 'trashy' for scholarly attention, as a form of escape from the daily demands of their lives. Using interviewing and ethnography of a group of romance readers, Radway illustrated how women fans found great value in romance novels, admiring the portrayal of strong and independent heroines.

Radway's work was innovative for a myriad of reasons, including her qualitative social scientific study of the *audience* in addition to the text, and her focus on 'women's' genre previously deemed trivial for scholastic attention. By talking with women on their own terms and using their own language and space, Radway was able to understand how women used romance novels to evade household duties and claim time to indulge their own needs and fantasies.

Press (1991) continued in Radway's tradition with her influential book, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience*, exploring the ways in which women watch and connect with television. Rather than assuming 'one' female audience, Press sought to understand the way class and generation varied the viewing experiences by interviewing women of different ages in both the working class and the middle class. In doing so, Press documents the differing role that television plays in reinforcing our culture's hegemonic values, finding that "[P]opular television images represent certain social groups, issues, and institutions systematically and repetitively in a manner that often reflects the position of these groups within our society's hierarchical power structure" (1991: p. 27). These findings were a critical juncture for feminist audience research as emerging researchers began combining the contributions of both Press and Radway. While Radway's work validated that female genres warrant scholarly attention, Press brought to light that women's audiences are not unidimensional and that other variables, such as socioeconomic status and generation, must be considered.

Other scholars have explored how 'postfeminist' audiences contextualize and interact with various media. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) theory that sexual, economic, and racial facets complicate the category of 'woman,' postfeminism emphasizes a multidimensional female audience. Postfeminist theory suggests that feminist audience researchers must develop a complex theory of the relationship between culture, politics, agency, and women's consumption (Tasker and Negra, 2007).

A leader in researching and theorizing postfeminist audiences, Angela McRobbie questioned how women in today's media environment interact with content that assumes feminism as a 'spent force' that must be both 'taken into account' but framed as though it has already 'passed away' (McRobbie, 2004: p. 256). Her recent works (2007, 2009) focus on the way female audiences negotiate education, earnings, sexual power, and fashion to maintain an aura of femininity while challenging hegemonic masculinity. In particular, her contribution to audience research conceptualizes the absence of critique from today's female audiences who may not have the power to react when their voice is "called upon to be silent … as a condition to her freedom" (McRobbie, 2007: p. 34).

Other scholars have also looked at the way in which postfeminist audiences interact with media. Akass and McCabe (2004) document fans' reaction to the show *Sex in the City*

through the lens of feminist critique. New media scholars (e.g., White, 2006, 2009, 2010) have explored 'postfeminist' expression in the public sphere through online forums. Tasker and Negra (2007) allege that postfeminist culture is "exemplified by the figure of a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman" and does not take into account the varied experiences of women. International scholars (Lemish, 2010; Lemish and Reznik, 2008; Parameswaran, 2002; Hegde, 2011) have attempted to bridge this gap by broadening the idea of female audience to look not only at the U.S. and Western audiences, but to look more globally and to understand issues of transnationalism and imperialism as they affect female audiences worldwide.

Global Audiences

The study of global audiences starts largely in response to the 'cultural imperialism' thesis that analyzes media as an instrument of cultural domination, reflecting uneven flows and exchanges between the West and the rest of the world. Canonical studies of cross-cultural audiences (Ang, 1995; Liebes and Katz, 1990; Gripsrud, 1995) challenge the simplicity of this rhetoric based on the misconception of passivity on the part of the local audiences (for a more detailed critique of the cultural imperialism thesis, see Morley, 2006). Far from producing a homogeneous global culture, audience studies have shown that media products moving across national boundaries are often reinterpreted according to local cultural grids. By insisting that international audiences were neither powerless nor uncritical to American television shows, this pioneering research further supports active audience theory on a global scale. However, despite the fact that global audiences have agency to reinterpret or reject what is offered, they have rather limited power to decide which programs are imported in the first place. The United States is still the major media exporter to the global market, even though its relative dominance is declining. The postcolonial approach reminds international media scholars that they must balance a romanticized vision of audience empowerment with a reconstructed politic of media manipulation.

McMillin (2007) notes that postcolonial and critical audience research needs to move beyond the 'cultural imperialism' frame to ask a wider range of questions about international audiences. Based on a mobile and multisited ethnography, Abu-Lughod (1999) studies Egyptian TV drama as a key institution that stitches audiences together for the production of national culture. She watches television and discusses its meanings with two different groups: (1) women in the villages of a rural, underdeveloped region of Upper Egypt and (2) women who work as domestic servants in Cairo. These television dramas provide common reference points for their audiences who contribute to national affinity. Drawing on recent scholarship on the politics and pleasures of reality television, Punathambekar (2010) studies a series of events surrounding the third season of *Indian Idol* to explore how reality television, situated to the changing landscape of Indian television, has enabled new modes of cultural and political expression. In their consideration of the *Super Girls' Voice*'s audience

(a Chinese counterpart of *The American Idol*), Cui and Lee (2010) focus on the issue of whether the reality show has altered the power relationship between the media and the audience. Most of their focus group discussants enjoyed watching the 'super girls' for their ordinariness, but still derived satisfaction from seeing how these ordinary girls became extraordinary through the reestablishment of the media/ordinary boundary.

One of the major trends of the last decade has been the 'regionalization' of media productions and reception within the multicountry markets linked by geography, language, and culture. For instance, Japanese pop cultures and Korean TV dramas have been startlingly successful in the East Asian region since the late 1990s. The regional media flows open up new possibilities to study non-Western audiences in terms of their perceptions of colonial–postcolonial relationships, gender subjectivity constructions, and nationalist responses to transnational media culture exchange. Lin and Tong (2008) conducted a comparative study of the viewing practices of female fans in Hong Kong and Singapore. Based on in-depth interviews with the fan groups, they found that these female audiences are adept in using Korean dramas to construct what they see as their distinctive 'Asian' modern femininities. While both groups appreciated the hybridization of traditional values and modern images in Korean dramas, the female viewers in Singapore seemed to be more inclined toward traditional values and Confucian ideals of femininities than the Hong Kong viewers. Through interviews with middle-aged female fans in Japan, Mori (2008) found that the penetration of Korean TV dramas into actual Japanese family life has political potential for understanding and reconstructing Korea–Japan relationship in new ways. These studies demonstrate the emergence of regional media culture and offer new conceptual insights into global audience studies, which cannot be ascertained through previous US-centric analyses.

Besides the global flow of media production and consumption, audience studies can also be used to examine how migrants, multinational citizens, and other cosmopolitans use the media to negotiate their identities and transnational connections. Gillespie (2006) started a collaborative ethnographic study of the news-viewing practices among multilingual households in the United Kingdom. Interviewees watched the attacks of September 11 on multiple news channels and in a variety of languages, then discussed with researchers their everyday media practices. Given the perceived bias in Western reporting, these transnational viewers actively sought alternative news sources through the use of satellite television and the Internet. This study contributes to the scholarship on the emergence of transnational audiences, publics, and identities.

There is a difference in emphasis, however, between the transnational studies of traditional media (e.g., TV programs and videos) and the research centered on the use of new media (e.g., mobile phones and the Internet). As Lewis and Hirano (2001) found in their study of Thai-Australia families, watching rented Thai videos serves as a site of escapism for Thai brides who are culturally and socially isolated. Although their use of ethnic video drama helps Thai brides to cope with their nostalgic sentiments, it does not change the marginalized social status that they often enjoy in their host country. In contrast, a number of scholars (e.g., Hiller and Franz, 2004; Chan, 2010) who studied how migrants use new communication technologies, especially the use of Internet, suggest that migrant groups benefit concretely from their online activities in terms of cultivating social ties in both home and host countries, and forming cybercommunities that facilitate their social adaptation to the new environment while maintaining strong attachments to the homeland. These studies have illustrated the value of studying audiences or the users in the new media context as a key way to understand the transnational identities and lived realities of diasporas.

As noted in previous examples, cross-national research proves to be one of the most fruitful research approaches in transnational media studies. Based on in-depth interviews conducted in 2001 and 2004, Elias (2008) studied how Russian-speaking returnees from the former Soviet Union use electronic and print media in Israel and Germany. A parallel comparison of returnees in Israel and Germany afforded an interesting case to examine the immigrants' media consumptions in different structural and cultural contexts. The findings showed that these immigrant groups used the media in very different ways. Characterized by assimilative media consumption, returning immigrants in Germany limited themselves nearly exclusively to consumption of German-language media. However, German-speaking media did not guarantee 'a free ticket into German society' (p. 138). These immigrants felt alienated and isolated from German culture even when speaking German. In contrast, Russian-speaking Jews seek out various forms of Russian-speaking media in Israel. Both newcomers (1–3 years in residence) and old-timers (5 years in residence), who get information through Russian-speaking media, however, do feel at home in Israel. This study points out the importance of political, ideological, and cultural factors, which condition both media consumption of the immigrants and their integration into the host society. While traditional ethnography focuses on particular ethnic groups in a specific geographic place, a revised ethnographic approach targeting international audiences needs to draw out the wide connections between local experience and the global context in which their cultural identity is located.

Directions for Future Research

Regarding television audiences specifically, the emergence of cable technology at the end of the network era fundamentally altered the ways in which content becomes socially important. In describing the shift from the multichannel transition period, which began in the 1980s, to the postnetwork era in the early 2000s, Lotz (2007) notes that the emergence of so many new networks and niche channels fundamentally changed the economics of the television industry. Also, rather than delivering large audiences to advertisers within this new environment, producers, like advertiser-supported cable networks, can afford to create content that will only be watched by 1% of the available audience (Lotz, 2007: p. 37). As a consequence of these economic and cultural realities, postnetwork television

differs from the programming of the network era in that the cultural relevance of any content ceases to be a direct function of audience size, and producers are no longer limited to creating content that appeals to 'a multiplicity of social types at once' (Gitlin, 1982: p. 248).

With such changes, the medium has become increasingly legitimate as a cultural form with the production of targeted content appealing to high-income, educated niche audiences. A recent Harvard course centered on HBO's The Wire (Chaddha and Wilson, 2010) confirms Lotz's assertion that only in the context of television's postnetwork era can a particular content be affirmed by "hierarchies of artistic taste and social importance" and become "imbued with what Pierre Bourdieu terms 'cultural capital'" (Bourdieu, 1984; quoted in Lotz, 2007: p. 40). According to Newman and Levine (2012), however, the cultural legitimation of quality television content relies on the same imbalanced binaries that are associated with the medium's historical degradation. As a result, television is now bifurcated. Content reminiscent of network era programming becomes 'bad' television in the postnetwork era because of its association with the passive, 'feminized' viewing experiences of mass audiences; while television shows like The Sopranos and The Wire become 'good' television because of their association with the active, 'masculine' viewing experiences of elite niche audiences. In contrast with previous research examining the relationship between social class and television audiences (Press, 1991; Morley, 1980, 1988; Seiter, 1999), however, the relationship between social class and postnetwork audiences remains largely unexplored.

Furthermore, as audience researchers we must also acknowledge that the television landscape is changing, blurring the lines between producer and consumer (Meyrowitz, 2010). One of the fastest growing sectors of participatory television is the genre of 'reality television,' a programmatic landscape that purports unscripted, real-life glances at the lives of 'ordinary' people (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004). To date, most scholarship emphasizes the way reality television reinforces class differences and reveals the role television continues to play in constructing hegemonic discourse (Lizardo, 2010; Grindstaff, 2002; Couldry, 2011; Andrejevic, 2011). More attention must be paid to biopic reality television, formats that mimic documentaries. Since biopic narratives are situated in identifiable communities, they provide the opportunity for understanding how indirect participants negotiate their cultural and class position in relation to reality television. These 'integrated audiences' have friends, relatives, and members of their community featured on national television, but still act as an audience, consuming the final product (Tripodi forthcoming).

Conclusion

With the changing media environment and changing media genres and formats, the shape, structure, and even the very definition of the media 'audience' keeps changing in ways that acknowledge the more active and interactive roles that audiences play in the new media environment. As Barker and Mathijs (2012) find in a multimethod research project spanning a dozen countries and generating 25 000 responses, "cultural product such as films are not message-vehicles, to be assessed for their lesser or greater 'effect,' but complexly organized bodies of meaning, which draw on and react back onto their constitutive culture" (676). They also note the increasing importance of ancillary texts as "news, reviews, gossip, leaks, publicity, posters, merchandising, etc., work in complicated ways, and with different groups of people, to steer, influence, or create emergent frames for receiving and affiliating with as a film such as Lord of the Rings" (679). Nonetheless, the term 'audience' itself is progressively less used as scholars confront the issue of how to study media influence as media become more fragmented and more interactive.

The 'mass' sense in which we thought of the media audience in the first decades of our field has now evolved into a sense that most audiences are 'niche' audiences of various sorts, and that all audiences are active to some degree, though some are more active, and interactive, than others. This necessarily changes, and is continually changing, the sorts of questions it's important for audience researchers to ask; the design of audience research studies; the way we think about the relationships between production, reception, activity, and passivity in the context of media audience study, and the way we think about the nature of media influence itself, and how we should conceptualize this. The study of media audiences, however, continues to be a central and important part of media research more generally, and will continue to be so even as the media environment, media genres, and the relationship between media production and reception continue to evolve.

See also: Audience Measurement; British Cultural Studies; Mass Media, Representations in; Public Sphere and the Media; Television: General.

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