

Audiences and publics in global perspective: challenges of translation and interpretation

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The study of media audiences has long been hotly contested, reflecting an intellectual history of academic oscillation (Katz, 1980) regarding their supposed power – to construct shared meanings (as debated by semiotic and reception approaches to media culture), to mitigate or moderate media influences (as debated by media effects research) or to complete or resist the circuit of culture (as debated by cultural studies and political economy theories).

While Elihu Katz (1980) locates the oscillation between theories of powerless or powerful audiences in the twentieth century's twists and turns of authoritarian versus democratising political regimes, respectively, recent decades have seen a further shift in the academy as the ontological status of the audience shifted from the singular object of realist scrutiny 'out there' towards the plural and even fugitive (Bratich, 2005) or fictional (Hartley, 1987) or discursive constructions (Ang, 1990) of late modern or postmodern social theory.

Equally radical in its way, the study of audiences is now being transformed by the transformation of the mediascape itself – from one dominated by national mass broadcasting and the press, albeit tactically undercut by the vital current of interpersonal communication flowing through the lifeworld – to the mediation and digitalisation of everything, with simultaneously convergent and divergent, and centrifugal and centripetal consequences, on an increasingly global scale.

The notion of 'Transforming audiences, transforming societies' (itself the title of a lively European network that has recently renewed audience research) captures the agenda facing us in late modernity: more globalised, more commodified, more connected (and, thus, potentially more participatory yet simultaneously more surveilled).

Efforts to understand and manage these changes are resulting often contested, sometimes mutually contradictory claims about the nature and significance of media audiences, stemming from within but also far beyond the academy.

Audiences, it is said, "are everywhere and nowhere" (Bird, 2003: 3).

Audiences are dead (Jermyn & Holmes, 2006) or more alive than ever (Rosen, 2006).

Audiences offer uncertain profits though they are ever more desperately sought by media industries (Ang, 1990; Bolin, 2010).

Audiences are politically lightweight yet ever more is spent on political campaigning budgets.

Audiences are politically apathetic yet every state regime under pressure seeks first and foremost to control what they can access.

Audiences were long derided for their collective status (as crowd or mass) but are now equally derided for their individualised and instrumentalised status (as user or consumer).

One might think all this would make audience research interesting.

Yet despite a quarter century or more of debate over – put simply - audience activity or passivity, many communication researchers seem as ready as ever to take them for granted as an invisible and indivisible mass, often not even according them an index entry in books claiming comprehensive coverage of media in country X or media representations of Y or the mediation of societal phenomenon Z.

Implied audiences lurk behind a host of homogenising synonyms (market, public, users, citizens, people) and nominalised processes (diffusion, adoption, culture, practice, mediation, identity, change) that mask their agency, diversity, life contexts and interests at stake.

Indeed, as Jack Bratich (2005: 261) put it, ‘the audience is everywhere being studied, but rarely named as such.’

When the omission of direct consideration of audiences (arguably, their symbolic annihilation; Tuchman, 1979) is pointed out to media and communication researchers, the response is often a wry acknowledgement of lack. To be sure, audiences matter, colleagues concur, but they remain positioned at the end of Harold Lasswell’s (1948) famously linear process of communication (“who says what through which channel to whom with what effect?”). Even though supposedly our field has moved on from simple linear conceptions (Carey, 1975), attention to audiences can seemingly be perpetually postponed without criticism.

Worse for the audience researcher who charges colleagues with neglecting audiences, however, is the receipt of a puzzled frown or dismissive glance: how, the challenge is returned to us, can the study of audiences contribute to or qualify or reframe the study of such important phenomena as political communication or political economy, governance and regulation, or cultural practice?

At least the wryly-regretful group is familiar with the now-received wisdom (among segments of our field) on why audiences matter (Livingstone, 2012), established following the enthusiastic response to Stuart Hall's (1980: 131) claim that "a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research ... may be opening up" in his seminal Encoding/Decoding paper.

Specifically, in relation to claims about media representations, the study of audience reception has challenged the authority of elite textual analysts to conjure up visions of model or implied, imagined or inscribed readers without thinking to check whether actual readers are obediently falling into line with 'audience conjectures' (Stromer-Galley and Schiappa, 1998: 27).

In relation to top-down claims about the political economy of communication, the study of audiences-in-context it revealed the everyday micro-tactics of appropriation that reshape and remediate media forms and goods, forcing academic recognition of marginalised voices, unexpected experiences and the importance of the lifeworld in the circuit of culture (Hall, 1980).

In relation to dominant theories of media imperialism, the study of audiences took this challenge to a global level, revealing processes of reappropriation, glocalisation, counterflow and, occasionally, resistance to major media conglomerates (Tomlinson, 1999).

Last, in relation to the often-universalistic claims of media effects theories, the study of audiences showed why these only ever apply contingently, for media influence is always 'read' through the lens of audiences' lifeworld contexts (Bird, 2003).

Yet this group seems curiously reluctant to recall that audience research, nurtured by a rich mixture of semiotic theory, cultural critique, ethnographic methods and the feminist revalorisation of the 'everyday', poses a continuing challenge to complacent hopes that audiences can be taken for granted and, so, permitted to slide down the ranking of research priorities.

Audiences may be messy, unpredictable, hard to locate, as liable to undermine the researcher as they are to behave as desired (Livingstone, 2010). But that is what makes them interesting and significant both their own right and also when framed as publics, users or any other category of social actor in today's thoroughly mediated societies.

For an audience researcher, the mediation of ever more dimensions of society expands rather than contracts the task ahead. Indeed, the more contradictory the claims about citizens versus consumers, individuals versus crowds, participants versus couch potatoes, the more interesting the task to explain how they can, as they must, all be part of the same population – ordinary people, the general public, albeit now living in a heavily-mediated world.

This is not to say that analysing processes of mediation through the lens of audience research is always useful. But I suggest that, in whatever field of society one might examine, whenever the textual, technological or institutional dimension of communication is in some way important to the unfolding action – for example, whenever the symbolic, representational or cultural aspect of a situation is complex, its power influential or its strategy or purposes contested – audience research (in terms of its theory, methods, findings and politics) will have something to contribute.

Furthermore, once one is attuned to the frequent and often contradictory assumptions made about people in relation to media or mediation (i.e. about people as audiences), whether within or beyond the academy, it is striking how amenable they become to empirical investigation; and such an investigation becomes all the more motivating the more it becomes apparent that tacit assumptions about audiences are often misguided, at odds with the evidence.

But for the second group of researchers – those who regard the study of audiences with a puzzled frown, audiences are judged almost irrelevant to the larger project, an idiosyncratic source of error, a naïve confusion of voice with truth, a complicating distraction from what really matters – power, production, regulation, representation, market.

This is the group who led the backlash against the then-exciting project, castigating it through extreme formulations as supposedly asserting unfettered polysemy or excessive resistance or naïve celebrations of agency and individualism (Hartley, 2006).

Yet as I have argued elsewhere, to challenge the authority of text analysts is not to deny the importance of texts. To recognise local processes of meaning making is not to deny the political-economic power of major media conglomerates. To assert that media influence is contingent is not to deny its existence. And to research the shaping role of diverse lifeworlds is not to deny the social structures that, through a complex dynamic, strongly shape those lifeworlds (Livingstone, 2010).

As David Morley pointedly observed, “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).

Nonetheless, it seems that the audience project – and a recognition of significance of ordinary people’s collective and individual experiences of living in a ‘digital world’ (Couldry, 2014) - must be reasserted for each generation of scholarship, rearticulated in relation to each new phase of socio-technological change and, perhaps most interesting, reflexively rethought as the very conditions of modernity are globally reconfigured.

One starting point is to insist on ecological (or cultural or holistic) accounts of mediation in society rather than linear processes of influence that start with a powerful source and neglect to trace the process through to what is now (problematically) termed the ‘end-user’ (here James Carey, 1975, is a key inspiration). There are many possibilities here, but among these I suggest the potential of the circuit of culture model remains untapped.

As originally set out by Johnson, Hall, du Gay et al (op cit., see also Champ 2008), this cyclic and transactional model recognises that audiences are vital to completing the ‘circuit of culture’ in which production, text, institution, representation, governance, interpretation and identity all find their place, for all these elements are mutually articulated in the mediation of culture (Mayer, 2005).

As Richard Johnson put it, in these multi-sited struggles for the power to shape the forms and flows of meanings in society, each moment is shaped by particular social practices and contexts, and at the same time, “each moment [in the circuit] depends upon the others and is indispensable to the whole” (1986: 284).

As Ranjana Das and I have argued recently, part of the appeal of this model is its emphasis on how these struggles over meaning occur at the interfaces between the distinct yet mutually-dependent moments in the overall circuit (Livingstone & Das, 2013).

The circuit is not, therefore, a matter of positing links among autonomous spheres of activity (production, regulation, representation, etc.) but, rather, of recognising that each ‘moment’ in the circuit is constituted dynamically, processually - through its interface with the others (Silverstone, 1994). For instance, representation is constituted significantly through its processual relations with production, regulation, interpretation, and vice versa. For this reason, John Fiske’s (1992) proposed replacement of the noun, audience, with a verb – ‘audiencing’ – was constructive, even if grammatically awkward.

Media and communication research takes a false step, I suggest, each time it reifies any of these ‘moments’ in the process as self-contained entities ‘out there’, divorced from wider structures of meaning-making.

And it regains its ecological integrity and insight each time it grasps the transactional interrelations among audiences, representations, institutions, governance and other powerful processes.

Das and I further sought to historicise our argument, recognising the many ways in which the circuit of culture has been structured over time, and inviting future researchers to debate its present and emerging form or, more likely, forms. Thus we suggested that, before the advent of mass media, the communicative interface was largely defined by the social (and situated) relationship between speaker and hearer, with

worrying uncertainties (for those holding power) ensuing in circumstances where this situated relationship was displaced by the formation of a crowd (itself linked to notions of rabble, rumour and riot).

Following the spread of print cultures (and, equally important, print literacy), the communicative interface (now framed through the pairing of text and reader) became dispersed across space and time, reconfiguring communities and crowds into the new collectivity of the public with the potential – much debated – for sustaining not merely a rational reading public but a fully-fledged public sphere.

With the twentieth century rise of broadcast media, the communicative interface was once again localised in time though dispersed in space, literacy as a barrier to participation was removed, and the notion of the mass audience was born, in part torn from its association with the public and instead aligned with the market (and paired as ‘audience’ or, disaggregated as ‘viewers’ with producers and/or programmes).

Yet this period sowed the seeds of its own transformation (one couldn’t say destruction exactly) as the market became global, and audiences had to work ever harder to make sense of the imported as well as home-grown meanings on offer, thereby demonstrating their potential, modest perhaps, to reconfigure the interface in the direction of their own interests and concerns (Liebes and Katz, 1990); hence the metaphoric re-appropriation of the text/reader pairing in ‘active audience theory’, deliberately highlighting the importance of interpretative communities in context (Radway, 1988), and linking today’s increasing fragmentation of attention and contingency of shared experience back to pre-broadcast times (e.g. Darnton, 2000).

Now that the interface (further reconceived in terms of users and ‘affordances’; Bakardjieva, 2005; Lievrouw, 2011) has become networked, any and all forms of communicative interaction are possible (mass and niche, vertical and horizontal, one-way and multi-way).

But it is noteworthy that while navigating and even participating in the shaping of meanings at the digital interface seems to permit greater equality between ‘users,’ ‘produsers’ (Bruns, 2008) and ‘producers’, its high access and literacy (and legibility) prerequisites are generating greater inequality among the ‘users’ as they engage not only with media but with the world through media (Deuze, 2012).

While it is fascinating to observe that the sense of present and pressing socio-technological change makes many of us look back over a longer past than has been common, at least in twentieth-century communication research, the wider transformations wrought by globalisation are, in parallel, making many of audience researchers look across cultures and contexts to recognise the nature and scale of difference in the phenomena under study.

Such a comparative or transnational lens also recasts our understanding of ourselves as researchers – at the least, inviting the de-Westernisation of communication research or, more radically, de-centring any

sense of ‘us’ and ‘our’ tradition of knowledge and ways of knowing – as Eurocentrism, orientalism and imperialist visions are challenged by post-colonial critiques (Chakrabarty, 2008; Haringdranath, 2012; Wang, 2011). This challenge is made obvious to many of us through teaching – about media, about audiences.

This is a challenge even within Europe. All cultures, including academic cultures, encode their assumptions within language. I began a European comparative project called Audiences and Publics ten years ago to develop these interests.

The project had begun, following an innocent misunderstanding – a French colleague looked puzzled at the English speaker’s talk of “the audience”: does she mean “le public,” she asked her companion.

A lively discussion then mapped the French lexicon where, it appeared, “audience” is an invention of the commercial ratings industry, while “public” is the collectivity who watches television.

So while the English language makes little distinction between the audience measured by the industry and the complex ways in which people collectively engage with the news or Dallas - or Hamlet, or the circus, I find it fascinating that French does so; yet French, unlike English, does not draw a strong line between the public (seen in English as thoughtful, civically engaged) and the audience (seen as mindless, alienated, focused on consumption and pleasure).

If such close cultures struggle to understand one another, what of more distant and disparate cultures? Last year, Richard Butsch and I asked colleagues around the world to participate in a project that pursued just this question, inviting contributors familiar with both Western English scholarly discourse on audiences as well as discourses within another culture who thus could act as cultural “translators” for us and for our readers.

We wanted to understand how audiences are talked about, presumed about and even regulated for around the world (Butsch & Livingstone, 2013). What, in short, are the meanings of audiences?

The first principle of de-Westernizing is to shed development and modernization theories that presume a phylogeny of national and cultural evolution in which Western societies are the standard of progress against which post-colonial societies could be measured and their future paths predicted. This is a far from straightforward enterprise, given the historic spread and, in various ways, co-evolution, forms of resistance and counter-flows involving the English language and Western cultures globally.

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s call on scholars to provincialize Europe reflects this tension when he seeks to question Europe’s universality and to treat it as any other culture, while at the same time not to “pluralize reason” (2008 [2000]: xiii). What does it mean, he asks, to strip out the Western from India or Africa after

centuries of colonial rule, so as to rediscover and reestablish an “authentic” culture of “one’s own”? He writes (2008: 4):

“The phenomenon of ‘political modernity’ – namely the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy and capitalist enterprise – is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe. Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history.”

Translation across cultures – one of the key themes of this conference – is deeply challenging. Translation invokes the “partly opaque relationship we call ‘difference,’” as Meaghan Morris puts it. Georgette Wang calls less for perfect translation than for the recognition of equivalence, for establishing the conditions of what she calls “culture-commensurability” while not “rushing to achieve commensurability... [since this] tends to result in easy comparisons and analogies.”

Even when scholars have a thorough knowledge of both the culture being translated and that which it is being translated into, much gets ‘lost in translation’, and often we don’t know what we don’t know.

Richard and I decided on a strategy that began as an exercise in comparative keywords, referencing Raymond Williams, to map the semantic map of keywords used – in everyday and expert or elite discourses - to capture ordinary people’s relations with media at different times and in different places.

The result is a host of contextualized detail that I cannot begin to convey to you here. So let me offer a snapshot of a few of the chapters, and then draw some conclusions.

Sudha Rajagopalan compares Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian discourses. In Tsarist Russia, the Latin derivative, *publika*, described only Westernized, elite audiences, and the rest of the population, mostly peasants, who rarely if ever read or witnessed public performances, were *narod* (Народ), or something close to “the people,” but without its modern political connotations, or “the folk”. The Soviet government then redefined the *narod* as the base of the ruling Communist Party and of revolutionary spirit but in need of Party guidance through government-controlled media.

In the post-Soviet era, the (re)turn to private ownership and commercial media reframed audiences as consumers and “taste publics,” according them little political identity. Academic discourse, on the other hand, has tended to retain the older, elite disdain for the *narod*. The elite-masses distinction weaves through the whole history, even as the characterization of *narod* varied.

Wendy Willems contrasts colonial Southern Rhodesia to post-colonial Zimbabwe. The colonial government directed one discourse to the European settler-citizens and another to disenfranchised African subjects. Newspapers for settlers framed their white readers as good and loyal citizens, while newspapers circulated to the urban, African middle class avoided political issues and addressed their readers instead as consumers of entertainment. Government-controlled radio was directed solely to white settlers as citizens, while it was considered unsuited to the illiterate, rural Africans who were defined as primitive, highly suggestible and prone to acting out.

On independence, the new socialist Zimbabwean government defined radio's purpose as educating the African "rural masses" to change them into modern socialist citizens, but maintained a similar elite-masses distinction as before. In the 1990s, Zimbabwe's privatized media repositioned their audiences as consumers as well as citizens. At the same time, an unpopular government reverted to the old colonial framing of rural Africans as a suggestible crowd prone to injudicious violence. Through this history we see a continuing thread of elite-masses distinction from colonial through post-colonial periods of the twentieth century, not unlike the framing of the *narod* from Tsarist to Soviet Russia.

Stephanie Donald explains that in China, from the Revolution into the 1990s, the concept of audiences has been an explicitly "sociopolitical construct," built on the distinction between a Communist Party elite and the rest of the population, labelled the masses (*qunzhong*, 群众), conceived without "expectation of self-management, agency or choice," as she phrases it – although Jingsi Wu adds that the Chinese government constructed *qunzhong*, or the masses, as a positive historical force and the instrument of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, albeit a force without its own agency.

Donald's landscape of Chinese discourse on audiences locates it within the political history of China since the Revolution. Media were and still are, to a considerable degree, considered a means to "guide" the masses. The elderly people that Donald interviewed, who had lived through much of this history, appear to have internalized the Party's definition of and role for them.

However, with reforms since the 1980s, as China has increasingly expanded markets in its economy and grown global ties, her interviewees have begun to redefine their roles as more active, even civic audiences. Wu illustrates this through audiences voting for contestants on the popular television talent show, *Supergirl*, which became a contested issue in the 2000s for fear it might suggest or encourage active citizenship. Discourse by elites in major newspapers reveals tensions in the commercial, political, and cultural framings of these new audiences over their increased agency. Through this Wu introduces an aspect of consumers taken for granted and neglected in Western scholarship – their agency.

Joe Khalil describes the Arab world and the fit or lack of fit of the idea of publics to discourses about audiences. He examines and compares three different discourses. First he discusses Muslim religious broadcast constructions of audiences as *Ummah*, the religious community of Muslims. Then he considers

differing Arabic media representations of audiences as, on the one hand, *al gamaheer* (جماهير), or the masses, a quasi-Marxist term used as part of Nasser's pan-Arab movement in the 1950s, and on the other hand, as the *Arab street*, a term more recently indicating the people, but also suggestive of crowds and their power of collective action, appearing variously in positive and negative terms that evoke similar images in the nineteenth-century West. Third he looks at transnational Arabic media's pan-Arabist framing of its audience, in which audiences are segmented and the three terms are repositioned apolitically for commercial reasons, such as *al gamaheer* as fans.

Aliaa Dawoud illustrates this complexity by examining Egyptian discourses about audiences for the daytime serials broadcast daily during Ramadan. Mubarak's regime imagined the serials as a means to acculturate the public in ways aligned with the ruling party (and so to distract the people from politics). But the serials' actors and production personnel refer to audiences as viewers (*gomhor* (جمهور), connoting an intelligent, selective consumer, more active than the masses although less political than citizens – and certainly more positive than the views of the intellectual elites, who tend to refer to particular audience segments (women, children) in stereotypical or patronizing terms.

Kevin Smets, Iris Vandeveld, Philippe Meers, Roel Vande Winkel, and Sofie Van Bauwel explore the characterizations of diasporic Turkish and Indian immigrant cinema audiences in Antwerp, Belgium. European exhibitors, ethnic distributors, and the diasporic audiences themselves framed the audiences as ethnic communities in tension with their new culture. Distributors did this through the added lens of audience as market, and exhibitors through the lens of foreigners - ethnic customers with some undesirable habits. The diasporic audiences framed themselves as communities sharing a common cultural background and a common interpretation of the films, and framed the theatre as a space for sociability affirming family, neighbourhood, and cultural identity.

I cannot capture the linguistic and semantic complexity of our project in this talk – but I would assure you that the result was not akin to the Tower of Babel, with incommensurate languages and cultures talking past each other, each entirely in their own world.

Rather, I offer four points by way of conclusion.

Our study certainly revealed, on the one hand, the many and subtle terms that distinguish people's various relations to the media and, more importantly, through the media to the world. But it also revealed boundaries to this diversity too. Many societies (Russia, China, Egypt, and other Arabic societies, Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe) employ discourses that divide the society into elites and the masses, generally with a relatively small middle class in service to the elites. Note that the notion of the masses is not always conceived in the West's negative terms – the masses can be represented positively and ideologically, as the spirit of the nation or vanguard of revolution (although they are rarely accorded either individuality or

agency). We might next ask ourselves what other commonalities and differences could be found and how can they be explained?

Elite discourses, including elite discourses about the masses, tend to be better documented, of course, often leaving the terms in which people have conceived of their own relation to and through media barely known to outsiders. Hence the importance of ethnographic and cross-cultural empirical investigation of audiences. Otherwise our field will perpetuate within the academy the problematic ways in which, as several of our contributors illustrated, audiences are misunderstood or underestimated by elites, their voices and experiences not only going unheard but even being reformulated in terms of the elite discourses imposed upon them. So, can we include more empirical work with ordinary people in our projects on media and communications in the future? And consider carefully what could thereby be learned?

I have suggested both that misunderstandings of audiences arise when audiences are divorced from the larger circuit of culture and, further, that misunderstanding of the entire circuit of culture arises when audiences are omitted. It was fascinating to observe how scholars writing about India, China, Russia, Egypt, Zimbabwe and elsewhere in effect reconstructed a version of the circuit of culture to contextualise the conflicting interests at stake among the constructions of audiences they found to be variously asserted by the state, media industry, church, academy and, bottom-up, from the people themselves. In other words, none was able to explain their object of study (implicitly, to 'us', an English-speaking, Western-centred readership) without carefully positioning both media and audiences from country X or Y in wider historical, cultural and political terms.

This leads me to suggest that, possibly by dint of over-familiarity, the past century of the West talking to itself within the academy has permitted us to take contextual factors for granted to the extent that we have not only reified and decontextualised the audience but taken it for granted as too far 'out there' often to see clearly or bother with. The advantage of a de-Westernised approach for the West, then, might be both the chance to understand the many neglected forms of audiences (or 'audienicing') world-wide and the chance to understand Western audiences in context, de-familiarising the familiar and recognising how audienicing is embedded in the wider circuit of culture.

For sure this is a big task. It's a good thing that we are a large and international communication association!