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The end of the audience
How the nature of audiences changed

Abstract

Entering the ongoing discussion about the so-called “end of the audience”, this paper is concerned with the theory and practice of audience research, as it examined different perspectives of audiences as well as different research approaches. Various different theoretical concepts used to analyse how populations and individuals intersect with culture, society, and the media have been explored in order to give an accurate picture of today’s notion of audiences in a South African context. Overall, findings confirm a shift in the notion of audiences from a mass of passive spectators to active and selective media users equipped with certain “knowledge” depending on social experiences and cultural identities that furthermore determine interpretation of polysemic media messages. The media landscape has changed in recent decades, and today we are faced with a segmented market, serving highly fragmented audiences. These developments recommend looking beyond basic socio-demographic characteristics of media users in an attempt to classify media consumers into more distinctive types of audiences that can then be served according to specific media needs and interests. To do so, it seems necessary to make further distinctions of audiences including psychological characteristics as well as various related variables such as attitudes, tastes, values, norms or (the concept) of lifestyles. The paper concludes with the case of South Africa’s audiences as it is assumed that a wide range of given diversities, as for example regarding languages, races, beliefs, norms, classes, wealth, education and so forth, are significantly contributing to audience fragmentation and suggest adequate media supply.

Keywords: Active and passive audience, audience research, cultural resources, fragmentation, gender, lifestyle, market, mass, race, segmentation, selection, social experience, South Africa

Definition

First of all it seems necessary to define the term audience, as various researchers point out that the term itself is problematic and unfortunate, evoking the image of a mass of passive receivers consuming media content on a daily basis. According to McQuail (2005:396) “audiences are both a product of social context and a response to a particular pattern of media provision”. Therefore, audiences can be defined in different and sometimes overlapping ways:

By place or geography (as it would be the case of local media); by people (meaning a certain “target group” of people, defined by either a certain age group, gender, political views, income category etc.); by the type of medium or channel (in that case technology and organisation are combined and define audiences as viewers, listeners, readers, etc.); by the content of its messages (categorising people according to preferences for certain genres

subject matters, etc.); by time (referring to audiences at a certain time of day such as daytime or primetime audience) (McQuail, 2005:396).

Virginia Nightingale (in McQuail, 2005:397) proposed that audience is a description of a person or persons in a particular relationship with someone or something else. She offers a typology of four types and defines audiences as: “the people assembled” (the aggregate of spectators measured paying attention to a certain media presentation or product at a specific time); “the people addressed” (the group of people addressed by the communicator); “happening” (referring to the experience of reception in general); “hearing” or “audition” (participatory audience experience).

While these definitions or typologies divide certain audiences from others, they do not refer to the character of audiences (i.e. if certain characteristics are shared by an audience). As Kitzinger (2004:167) points out, people as audiences cannot be separated from personal, social and cultural continuity. As audiences are considered to be a “shifty concept”, the following two sections will examine the history of audience research in brief in order to try to get a more accurate and inclusive picture of the general notion of audiences and how it changed from the past to the present.

A brief review of conflicting theories and approaches

As Brooker and Jermyn (2003:5) point out, World War I can be seen as a historical moment when audience studies, in terms of the notion of the public as vulnerable and persuadable – at risk of “propaganda” – were at the centre of focus. Propaganda is understood as a primary and indispensable “weapon“ used in order to spread certain ideas and opinions with the general aim to get the vast majority to believe and follow these interests. In other words, propaganda means the “effective influence [of the public] with simple funds” (Bentele et. al., 2006:229). The hypodermic (or “silver bullet”/“magic bullet”) model with the belief in an all powerful media and the assumption that media content has a direct effect on its receivers originated from the Frankfurt school in the 1930s (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:34).

Mass society theory of the post World War II years did not insist on the view of an all powerful media but still suggested a potential for “dramatic media influence” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:240). The term mass that was introduced by Blumer (in McQuail, 2005:398) in order to describe a “large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed” audience whose members did not know each other, different from older social forms such as the group, the crowd or the public. Surprisingly enough the term mass is still widely used by researchers although a common sense of inadequacy of the expression has risen. McQuail (2005:399) states that much actual audience experience nowadays is rather small scale, integrated into social life and personal; and since most people choose media services freely, the potential for dramatic media influence might not be a precise description of the actual situation.

The hypodermic model as well as mass society theory were challenged by the minimal effects model, better known as two-step flow of communication model of mediated influence by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (in Brooker & Jermyn, 2003:13-18). Contrary to the hypodermic model the two-step flow model highlights the importance of social networks and focuses on so-called opinion leaders, as they are considered the ones who pay close attention to media messages and furthermore can influence people through personal contact. Basically, the survey “The people’s choice”, examining the influence on voters regarding their choice

who to vote for during the American presidential campaign in 1944, showed that the media's effect on the audience was rather one of reinforcement than of change and that its indirect effects on public opinion were mainly formed through opinion leaders (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003:14).

The minimal effect approach was more or less replaced in the late 1960s when researchers accepted the agenda-setting role of the media that was introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972:177) and emphasizes the media's role as a gatekeeper. The theory furthermore claims that through this selection process the media exerts a strong influence on what people think about. In brief, the agenda-setting theory asserts that one should look at the media's role in telling "not what to think but what to think about".

A shift in focus from a structural approach to a behavioural approach was made when researchers concerned themselves with the general functions of the media in society. A survey, carried out by Katz in 1959 (in Du Plooy, 2001:8-9), examined how people use the media to gratify certain needs. Consequently, the main focus was shifted from what the media did to people, to what people did with the media. Until today this is known as uses and gratification research.

A turning point in audience research towards a socio-cultural approach was made by Stuart Hall (1980:129) with the model of encoding and decoding that highlights the relationship between the media message that is encoded by a media content producer, and the ways the message is decoded (interpreted, made meaningful) by audiences. This theory pictures the audience as active "decoders" of media with different social networks, backgrounds and defining experiences that lead to multiple interpretations of the same media text. John Fiske (in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:274-275) states that media texts contain an excess of meaning. In the field of cultural studies, scholars used the term polysemy in order to describe the notion of multiple meanings of media texts. Therefore, it can be assumed that media texts are open to a certain extent and allow multiple interpretations and the audience as recipients of such media texts construct different meanings as a result of different cultural backgrounds and social experiences.

Today's notion of audiences

The brief description of various theories and approaches on audience research through less than a century make it clear that the audience itself as well as the media have been seen as being of a constantly changing nature (in a constantly shifting environment). The focus of the following section is to examine today's notion of audiences as the research literature suggests that the concept of media consumers has changed dramatically in recent decades from passive to active and selective people, from vulnerable and incompetent to an audience equipped with certain knowledge, depending on social and cultural experiences etc.

The active audience

Instead of picturing the audience as a heterogeneous vulnerable, and easily influenced mass that is open to persuasion, the general notion nowadays pictures the audience as active and selective with special interests and interpretations of media polysemic texts, on the grounds that people have different social experiences and cultural backgrounds as well as different personal histories of learning and development. A general shift from perceiving the viewer as

easy to manipulate towards an interpreting user can be noticed. Acknowledging the concept of an active and selective audience is a step towards believing in the intelligence and autonomy of people and furthermore grants people some power and agency in their use of media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:266-269). Croteau & Hoynes (2003:268) point out that audience activity not only resolves in actively interpreting media messages, but rather includes that audiences interpret media messages socially. Considering the media as part of our social lives, people sometimes partake of media in groups and other times media perception becomes part of broader social relationships. An interesting case in point is mentioned by Burkart (2002:382), who refers to so-called “Kitt-Themen” (“lute-topics”) provided by the media, meaning contents that people talk about and therefore interact and socialise actively – media messages that lute people together. However, in the case of television Morley (1986:158) argues that it is mostly women talking about what they viewed, as men are much more reluctant to talk about their viewing. From this, it follows that the general consumption of television material (in this case) between men and women is seemingly of a different nature.

Gender, class and race

A differentiation of media use according to sex has long ago been recognised. Certain types and genres of media programmes are therefore especially directed towards either a female or male audience. What is interesting about specific female or male media experiences is the view of social construction of gender influencing media choice and vice versa. Gendered audience experience is not only associated with different preferences and different levels of satisfaction but should, according to McQuail (2005:435), rather be pictured as a more complex outcome of the influence of social construction of gender on media choice, with a focus on particular everyday routines.

Referring to Press’s (in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:278) study “Women watching television”, which focused on the relationship between social structure and audience interpretation, it can be said that class plays a central role in how audiences make sense of media messages. Press’s findings show that women (of either working-class or middle-class) use a different set of criteria to evaluate programs and identify with, in that case, television personae. In his study of the British television magazine program “Nationwide” Morley (in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:274) interviewed groups of people from different social backgrounds, referring to their viewing experience of the program. His findings confirmed that the social position in research of audiences affects the decoding-process of media messages. Morley (in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:274) furthermore points out that in order to understand media messages some knowledge of both medium-specific and broader cultural codes is required. However, Morley confirms Press’s findings only to a certain extent, arguing that although there is a tendency for people from different socio-economic classes to interpret meanings of media messages differently, findings of “Nationwide” do not corroborate a direct correlation between class and interpretation of media content. However, Croteau & Hoynes (2003:278) make a good point when suggesting that social class in combination with age, race, ethnicity and gender play a key role in providing people with “cultural tools for decoding”. This view supports the understanding that social position does not automatically determine interpretation and understanding of media messages, but rather determines the discrepancy of access to a variety of cultural tools, which are furthermore used to construct meaning. The significance of culturally specific resource is subscribed by Liebes and Katz (in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:282-284), who studied ethnical groups’ decoding processes of the television program

“Dallas”. The findings of the study indicated that, although different ethnic groups watched the same program, they did not see the same things, as a result of specific cultural contexts of these groups.

Lifestyle

According to Johansson and Miegel (in. McQuail, 2005:434), “lifestyles are expressions of individuals’ ambitions to create their own specific, personal, cultural and social identities within the historically determined structural and positional framework of their society”. The concept of lifestyles is particularly useful to describe different (self-chosen) patterns of behaviour and media use. Generally, the concept of lifestyle emphasises looking beyond basic social-demographic categories, making advanced distinctions and including psychological characteristics in order to classify consumers into types of audiences. This is especially useful in commercial marketing in order to identify and observe target groups for advertising. The concept of lifestyle as self-chosen patterns of behaviour and media use choice assumes that media taste is not only determined by social class and education. As lifestyle research involves taking into account various social variables such as (media) behaviour, attitudes, tastes, norms, beliefs or values, it seems obvious that difficulties in the process of categorising lifestyles arise, as the possible variety of combinations offers an endless list of lifestyles that are media-relevant. As findings of Vyncke (in McQuail, 2005:434) show, the enclosure of media use variables in a typology that was intended to point out segmented lifestyles improved the typology’s power to categorise these lifestyles. Therefore, it can be said that media use plays an important role in “expressing and forming lifestyle identity”.

The end of the audience

Over more than thirty years ago Richard Maisel (1973:168) developed a three stage theory of social change and media growth. Essentially, the theory “the decline of mass media” claims that a society can, according to its developmental stage, be characterised by predominant forms of media such as elite media, mass media or specialised media. Although this theory has been criticised by various researchers, such as Donald Day (1974:299-300), for failing to consider (for example) changes in the nature of society or lacking of a cross-national perspective, the conclusion about a trend toward a specialisation of the media, especially with regard to more focused audiences these days, can still be considered valid to a certain extent.

As much as the general notion of the audience has changed, the mass media itself has changed too, similar to Maisel’s predictions, – not only regarding the fact of serving a more divided and specified audience, but also due to technological advances (that furthermore question the clear distinction between sender and receiver). As mentioned before, a shift from the so-called mass audience towards a notion of active and distinctive audiences with special interests, tastes and lifestyles, different social experiences and cultural backgrounds, selecting to use specific media for specific needs and gratification has taken place. In this spirit it is not surprising that questions about a possible “end of the audience” are at the centre of interest.

Audience fragmentation

From a functional approach, the media provide certain topics or information about the world outside the personal experiences of any audience member. Given that audiences are actively

selecting what kind of information about the social world they wish to receive, it is most likely that people develop idiosyncratic habits of news selection. Therefore, it is not surprising that this purposeful selectivity of media content results in highly fragmented audiences.

Merrill and Lowenstein (1979:35) state that “specialized tastes and abundant channels in every medium must result in an end to the age of the mass audience. Taking its place will be highly fragmented, ‘specialized’ audiences”. McQuail (1997:56) distinguishes between mass audience media and specialised media regarding the difference between heterogeneous or homogeneous audiences. According to this view, a general interest medium attracts a socially heterogeneous and mostly large audience by offering a broad range of content geared towards the diverse tastes and interests of different audiences. A homogenous audience, on the other hand, can be considered as being more distinctive, requiring a relatively narrow range of content.

To fully understand the concept of audience fragmentation it seems important to take a look into the early days of media reception. In the early days of radio or television, in most countries, there was only a limited choice of channels to choose from. Therefore, the term mass audience as a large dispersed and heterogeneous collective of people, consuming more or less the same media content and sharing a similar media experience, was considered to be an accurate description.

However, what McQuail (2005:448) calls the “unitary model”, describing the existence of a single predominant audience, was challenged by an emergence of an increased number of channels, more diversity and more options of choice. Developments of internal diversification displaced the “unitary model” with a “pluralism model”, which pictures fragments or sets of audiences that are still related to each other. The situation in most developed countries nowadays can be described with a predominant “core-periphery model”. As a result of the multiplication of channels and various forms of new media, people can now “design” their very own specific use of media, which might vary greatly from mainstream. This model, however, still implies that there is a majority or centre of media users, but the degree of specialised media use can vary greatly from the mainstream. The last stage of audience fragmentation, named the “breakup model”, no longer shows a centre of audience, but results in complete fragmentation of a large number of very diverse sets of media users. However, McQuail (2005:450) claims that “in most European countries, the multiplication of channels has not yet lead to a general fragmentation of audiences [...]”.

Regarding the development of media technologies it can be suggested that there is a certain potential of new media to fragment audiences. As new technologies encourage audiences to narrow the focus of their media consumption, specialisation and eventually the fragmentation of audiences is presumed to be the result. As McQuail (2005:449) states, the “typical media user has less time and motivation”. A logical consequence of this kind of media user is to consume only certain information that is of interest, which leaves people uninformed (or less informed) about other topics. If this is (or were) the case, “[...] population may be characterized at some future date as a collection of pockets of knowledge about specific things” (Tewksbury, 2005:333).

However, Tewksbury (2005:343-344) suggests that generally the potential for audience fragmentation is strongest when both audiences as well as media outlets are specialised. This

view confirms Maisel's (1973:168) theory to a certain extent as it suggests that the "decline of mass media" and the so-called "end of the audience", as a large, disperse and heterogeneous mass audience, go hand in hand. There will only be specialised and focussed media in cases where content specialisation is required by an audience and vice versa.

Audience segmentation

As the term segmentation explains, media supply can be matched more precisely to a certain set of audience, offering a greater possibility of selection. Reacting to the growth in the number of content options, a tendency for audiences to use specific media in order to pursue focused interests and needs is a consequence. The range of choices available on the internet clearly outnumbers alternatives offered by the print, radio or television sector (although digital television nowadays clearly offers a great choice of channels). From a media-industry point of view, audiences can be defined as segments, in terms of a market concept, and as a set of actual or potential consumers of media services and products with a specific socio-economic profile. However, this view of audiences is problematic in terms of examining the sender-receiver-relationship as a social and communicative one rather than a predictable one (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:266).

Overall, the focus of a market driven concept of the audience is on media consumption rather than media reception, which makes it clear that the view of audiences as market factors is a view from the standpoint of the media rather than from people in audiences (McQuail, 2005:399-400). Nevertheless, this view of audiences as commodities is part of one of four broad spheres of empirical research – market imperatives – with the primary goal of measuring audiences, identifying sociodemographic distribution and furthermore examining channel loyalty as well as attention flow.

The situation in South Africa

Much of what has been said above is borne out by the situation in South Africa where audience fragmentation is (and for a long time has been) one of the characteristics of media use. It does not come as a surprise as South Africa consists of a number of racial and ethnic groups that can be split into even more subgroups. It can be assumed that lifestyles vary greatly, considering that people from various different cultural groups with dissimilar social experiences, values and beliefs meet in one country. Additionally, the existence of eleven official languages (Afrikaans, English, Southern Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu) can be seen as one reason for a certain set of media consumers to require special media supply. Furthermore, the clash of class division, the issues of poverty and a high unemployment rate as well as a general inequality of the distribution of wealth and power strengthen the assumption that distinctive audience behaviour and grouping are a logical result of the predominant situation of the country.

Language diversity plays a special role regarding South Africa's radio landscape, where the SABC is obliged to provide a public service for each of the eleven official languages. The situation of television in South Africa, on the other hand, only shows some characteristics of segmentation, as one television channel might cater for a range of different languages. For example SABC1 focuses on the Nguni family of languages (Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele and Swati) with the remaining programme in English. Regarding the fragmentation of South Africa's audiences in terms of lifestyles, languages, cultural and societal diversities, it can be assumed

that the television environment does not yet provide all the audience specific media needs and interests. However, it must be mentioned that attempts towards a diversified television service have been made since the introduction of television (SABC) in 1976, when programmes were provided in English and Afrikaans only (Fourie, 2004:12).

Referring to McQuail's (2005:449) model of the four stages of audience fragmentation, it seems as if the "pluralism model" dominated South Africa's audiences, especially with regard to the print and radio the sector. As South Africa's press has been organised in terms of race, from the very beginnings in the Cape Colony until the present day, it can be assumed that the racial issue in the country automatically led to some extent of audience fragmentation (Fourie, 2004:43). According to De Beer and Wasserman (2005:42) "fragmentation of the media industry during the apartheid era, [took place in terms of] journalists [being] organised along racial lines [...], and] ideologically divided media entrenched and perpetuated societal schisms rather than striving for social cohesion [...]". However, race and racism that can be regarded as main characteristics of South Africa's print sector reached its peak in the period of 1948 to 1990, the apartheid era. At that time it was especially difficult for newspapers that were in opposition to the government, since restrictions, censorship, bannings and even the closure of certain newspapers were the result. Therefore, it can be assumed that the government tried to avoid media segmentation insofar as the general aim was to successfully control South African society. This was achieved mainly by the government's control of the flow of information and the use of propaganda in order to sustain the apartheid system (in Fourie, 2004:44). Therefore, it is not surprising that shifting from one segment to another was a complex and dangerous operation as the case of the Rand Daily Mail shows. Efforts by the paper in the late 1980s to increase reports of events in the black community failed as conflicting interest on the part of the advertisers led to the closing down of the company (Fourie, 2004:181). As this incident shows that although the Rand Daily Mail had large circulation figures, its readership profile could not attract the necessary advertisers due to low income levels of blacks at that time (Fourie, 2004:48).

Conclusion

The author of this paper suggests not taking the debate about "the end of the audience" too literally. As long as there is any media, there will be an audience and vice versa. The question to be asked is rather if the nature of the audience has changed and in what way and due to what circumstances this has happened. Is it still appropriate to speak of "the audience" or does it rather seem adequate to refer to users, spectators, consumers, listeners, viewers, readers or online-surfers?

This paper examined various theories of and approaches to audience research and made it clear that today's notion of the audience has changed. Audiences are regarded to be active and selective people equipped with certain knowledge, depending on social experiences and cultural resources that determine their interpretation of polysemic media messages. Developments of audience fragmentation and media segmentation may show some tendencies of a possible end of what was once known as a predominant mass audience but the question about a potential end of the audience cannot be answered conclusively at this point.

It seems necessary, though, in terms of a constantly changing (media) environment, as well as an instable notion of audiences, that general definitions and the validation and adequacy of terms used frequently in audience research should be reconsidered and adjusted from time to

time. It furthermore has to be taken into account that social variables like (media) behaviour, attitudes, tastes or values should be given more attention in audience research, as it can be safely assumed that these are essential variables in order to identify and understand different sets of audiences better. As the example of audiences in South Africa demonstrated, to fully understand complex potential developments, one might want to take a look back to the history of media landscapes, historical conditions and developments.

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