Technological University Dublin
ARROW@TU Dublin

Books/Book chapters | Centre for Social and Educational Research

2013

New Perspectives on Audience Activity: 'Prosumption' and Media Activism as Audience Practices

Brian O'Neill
Technological University Dublin, brian.oneill@tudublin.ie

J. Ignacio Gallego
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, jigalleg@hum.uc3m.es

Frauke Zeller
Ryerson University, fraukezeller@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cserbk

 Part of the Communication Technology and New Media Commons

Recommended Citation

O'Neill, Brian, Gallego, J. Ignacio, & Zeller, Frauke. (2013). New perspectives on audience activity: 'prosumption' and media activism as audience practices. In Niko Carpentier, K.C.S. & Hallett, L. (eds.). *Audience Transformations: Shifting Audience Positions in Late Modernity*. London: Routledge.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Centre for Social and Educational Research at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books/Book chapters by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, gerard.connolly@tudublin.ie, vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie.

Funder: COST

New perspectives on audience activity: 'prosumption' and media activism as audience practices

Brian O'Neill, J. Ignacio Gallego and Frauke Zeller

Abstract

Until relatively recently, the subject of social relationships, constituted in and through audience practices, has been a minor part of audience research studies. This chapter explores how social relationships and forms of audience agency change and / or evolve, through the usage of both traditional and 'new' media. In a media environment where traditional and new media worlds collide, the potential of audience practices to rework, not only media-audience relationships, but also wider social relationships, is now an important research theme. Two key examples of mediated relationships between social actors in conditions brought about through transformations in media culture are considered. We look at the evolution of audience 'prosumption' or 'produsage' (Bruns 2007), as well as at audience 'activism' (de Jong, Shaw and Stammers 2005). These examples are identified as illustrating new dynamics of social interaction, which may have the potential to contribute to larger, integrative social networks that transcend the existing boundaries of the traditional concept of audience. Against the background of traditional approaches to social relationships in the context of audience studies, we examine in both case studies the respective roles of the technologies, the social actors and the emergent social relationships concerned.

1. Introduction

For much of its history, the study of media audiences has focused, primarily, on what people do with media, how they read, interpret and respond to media texts – and on the impact or effects that media may have on them as a result of such interactions. A secondary interest has been with the actual social *relationships*, which result from being part of an audience. Here, audience agency is key and, as social actors, audiences 'using media to suit themselves' (Webster 1998, 194), develop social relationships in, and through, media reception and communication. How such social relationships and forms of agency change and / or evolve through the usage of both traditional and 'new' media in everyday life is the subject of this chapter. When, as now, traditional and new media worlds collide, the potential of audience practices to rework not only media-audience relationships, but also wider social relationships becomes an important research theme. Arguably, all social relationships are now mediated in some form or other, leading some researchers to ask new questions, such as 'what are people doing that is related to media'? (Couldry 2012). Our focus

in this chapter is on the 'productive' work of audience agency. We discuss two specific examples of how transformations in media culture have created opportunities for rethinking mediated relationships between social actors. We look at the evolution of audience 'prosumption' or 'produsage' (Bruns 2007), and at audience 'activism' (de Jong, Shaw and Stammers 2005), as illustrating new dynamics of social interaction and self-representation, both with the potential to contribute to larger, integrative social networks that transcend the existing boundaries of the traditional conception of the audience. In each case, we look at the respective roles of the technologies, the social actors and the emergent social relationships involved. We begin, however, by examining the background, summarising how social relationships have historically been dealt with in audience studies.

2. Constituting the audience in social relationships

While the media-audience relationship provides the primary analytical framework within the field of audience studies, there exists alongside the different interpretations of audience practices a longstanding interest in what it means to 'be' an audience. Nightingale (2004) has identified a four-fold typology within which audience experience intersects with social structures, positing publics, markets, communities and fandoms as constituting the principal axes around which social relationships are formed.

Arguably, the audience as public provides one of the earliest and most important concepts for thinking about audiences in a social context. At its root, the audience as public signifies a collective, engaging in discussion about the affairs of state, distinguished from either government or people acting in a purely private capacity (Butsch 2011, 150). As historical studies of audience reception show, long before mass media entertainment, audiences had been thought of in collective ways, whether as a crowd, a mass or a discerning public united in a collective experience of spectatorship or public participation (Bennett 1997; Butsch 2000; Douglas 1999). Such images of the collective are always evaluative or normative and range from the unruly and disruptive to the image of the 'conscientious, cultivated and informed citizen' that provides the benchmark for enlightened civic participation. Publics constitute the most overtly political dimension of audience participation.

Historically, audiences as publics are closely associated with the rise of the bourgeois press and the use of media to unify a dispersed middle class public sphere, developing a collective response to public affairs through informed public readership. In contemporary terms, audiences as publics

provide one of the primary platforms for exploring the scope for social and political engagement, highlighting issues of power in those social relationships, which are constituted in and through the media. Yet, despite the significance accorded to public engagement via media readership in late nineteenth century social thought, including in the works of Tarde, Park, Dewey, and Lippman (see Butsch 2011 for a review), the tendency within audience research has been to deny the potential for public participation by focusing instead on the isolated viewer, vulnerable to media effects, the social anomie and individualism of consumer, mass entertainment culture, or the overwhelming ideological power of privately owned media institutions.

By way of contrast, public service broadcasting has, since its origins, been defined in terms of the public sphere. Audiences for public service broadcasting are identified as citizens rather than as consumers or members of a particular community. Whether in relation to sports, politics, or significant national events, the symbolic value of the public service ethos is one closely identified with the collective celebration and sharing of common interests and experiences through electronic means. Nevertheless, it represents one of the key contested and fractured domains for constituting public experience (Scherer and Rowe 2012; Tracey 1998). The creation of an increasingly globalised, rather than national, media marketplace, has increased pressure on the financing of public service broadcasting, and the fragmentation of audiences through proliferating channels of delivery, places greater pressure on the potential of twentieth century institutions to act in the public interest (Lunt and Livingstone 2012). As such, audiences require ever greater organisational resources and technical expertise to act as a public and to deploy their power as an audience in order to lobby governments and media industries so as to get their voice heard, influence policy or effect change (Nightingale 2004).

If the public dimension of audience experience has been under consistent pressure as a result of recent transformations in broadcasting culture, the dominance of markets, and market relationships are central features of both old and new media cultures, giving rise to the perspective of audiences as markets. As Ang demonstrated in relation to the television industry, audiences mean something quite different from the perspective of media industries, representing a commodity to be bought and sold to advertisers competing for the attention of audiences (Ang 1991). Audiences enter into such commercial relationships both through their consumption of media advertising and as a result of buying consumer products and services that underpin commercially funded media. Audiences' links to advertisers may not be thought of in the first instance as a form of social relationship. However, due to the increasingly blurred nature of boundaries between programming, editorial and commercial content, commercialism permeates nearly all audiences' interactions with media,

supported by increasingly sophisticated tracking mechanisms used to map the web of opaque ties to commercial providers (Green 2010; Napoli 2003; Webster, Phalen and Lichty 2005). Despite widespread criticism among audience researchers about ratings and measurement systems, arguably, insufficient attention has been given to the industry perspective, or to the examination of the institutional understanding of audiences. It is such institutionalised knowledge that may well be the most influential in informing content and editorial policies, targeting and serving those audience segments and that, consequently, adds most to the commercial value of the audience's relationship with the provider (Turow 2011).

One area in which audience studies has contributed substantial research findings is in relation to the idea of audiences as a community, or 'audiencehood' based around shared adherence, through consumption, taste and practices, concerning media content. The 'interpretative turn' in communications research instigated a rich tradition of exploring audiences as symbolically and discursively constituted communities (Jensen 1984). Audiences, in this approach, are neither geographically specific communities nor directly a product of the media that address them. Instead, they emerge in social action as actualisations of the process of making sense of mediated communication (Lindlof and Grodin 1990). This approach focuses on the interpretative strategies that occur within the dispersed and elusive contexts of everyday media reception. From this perspective, interpretation is profoundly social and seeks to resolve the contradiction between the 'often private, diffuse and improvised conditions of media reception' (Lindlof 1988, 82) and the grand scale on which media discourse makes its impact felt. The audience community is therefore the site at which social practices of meaning and sense-making are co-ordinated through shared assumptions and shared practices of communication. Defying social classification, audience communities are ad hoc in nature, fluid and transient in form, but nevertheless sufficiently robust as systems of meanings to act as an overlay for already existing structures of social organisation. Radway's seminal *Reading the Romance* (1984) provides the archetype in audience research for reader-based communities of interpretation, combining ethnographic, in-depth, study of reading practices, with obvious parallels to cultural studies. It should be noted, however, that the author subsequently revised this work in favour of a more sociologically-grounded approach to audience communities (Radway 1999).

Relatedly, within the audience research tradition fandom and fan studies provides an area of enduring interest in social relationships created through processes of media reception. Read negatively, fandom is hardly a social relationship at all, and is associated with either mob hysteria, irrational crowds or a pathology of isolated over-attachment (Butsch 2008; Jensen 1992). Yet,

more significantly, a cultural interpretation of fandom has done more than most branches of audience research to call attention to the productive capacity of audiences, locating them as social actors within a vibrant cultural economy. Beginning with what he termed 'textual poachers', Henry Jenkins (1992) has called attention to the many rich forms of creative audience engagement with media content, such as appropriating and refashioning cultural resources, and adding value to them in both commercial and non-commercial ways. Importantly, he also highlights the commercially sensitive areas of copyright and intellectual property rights, thereby underlining the disruptive and rebellious potential of audiences. Such textual strategies really come into their own when linked to digital technologies, creating the conditions for Jenkins' notion of participatory culture in contrast to passive media spectatorship, and where 'rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules' (Jenkins 2006, 7).

Nightingale (2004) argues that the audience experience of fandom points to a future of the mass audience and to new types of media engagement through increasingly interactive modes that are neither feasible nor facilitated in traditional mass media forms. Some years later, she acknowledged that this earlier account had been incomplete, not taking into account the emerging potential of globally dispersed audiences of cyberculture and the possibilities for social action brought about by networked media (Nightingale 2011). It is this potential that we examine through our two example cases, those of audience 'prosumption' and audience activism. Has the participatory potential of new media and the internet transformed the power relationships involved in social, cultural or political spheres? Does 'prosumption' or media activism contribute to a restructuring of industry or societal roles? On the other hand, as critics sometimes claim, do the more fluid networks of contemporary media result in more fragmentary and illusory forms of audience power?

3. Audiences and 'Prosumption'

The concept of 'prosumption' depicts—in contemporary, general, terms—the notion that internet users are not only consumers of online content but also producers. Despite the perception that 'prosumption' is a relatively recent notion that arose in parallel with the so-called social web (Tapscott and Williams 2007), in fact, the concept dates back considerably further. As noted by Ritzer et al (2012), the term 'prosumption' was originally coined by Toffler in 1980, but the concept of the combination of production and consumption had already been discussed in earlier works including that of Marx and Baudrillard. The term gradually gained attention over the years, although its more sustained discussion was less evident before the advent of the social web.

'Prosumption' is now an *en vogue* concept that can be considered a buzz-word in many current discussions concerning the so-called 'social web', or 'web 2.0. As is commonly the case, the more often it is used in this way, the more blurred its meaning becomes as a result of de-contextualisation, linguistic modification, mutation, or simply incorrect usage. However, it is not so much disentanglement that we aim to achieve here (although, of course, we do seek to address that point), as it is a *critical assessment* of current trends and discussions around the concept in relation to audience and reception studies. In so doing, we ask: *What role do the frequently mentioned new technologies play here? What role do audiences play in connection with the concept of prosumption? What role do social relationships play in this respect?*

According to Ritzer et al (2012), whereas early attention paid to prosumption was predominantly focussed on theories of (offline) production and consumption, today's discussions have added a decisive technological momentum to the concept. That is to say, Web 2.0, or rather current internet applications, enable users to become prosumers, whereas the "old" media (i.e. the Web 1.0) comprised predominantly one-way communication media that defined users as mere recipients of content. However, let us first take a moment to further clarify the terms Web 2.0 and Web 1.0. Both terms are derived from the field of software development and testing, and, hence, each refers to a technical phenomenon. Interestingly, the term 'Web 2.0' "is normative as it suggests a positive valance in its implicit definition as a superior form of the Internet. Captured in this term is not only the idea of a shift in the Internet, but also that this shift is for the better" (Song 2010, 251). This positive appraisal attitude becomes even clearer when Web 2.0 is compared to its alleged prequel, Web 1.0. In short, the term Web 2.0, or the 'participatory Web', encompasses internet websites that allow users to interact and collaborate, hence 'participate' (see also O'Reilly 2005; Song 2010). This is in contrast to the Web 1.0 sites, which only allow users to 'passively' view their content. The more "utopian"-like characteristics of Web 2.0 foster open communication and the decentralisation of authority, including through user-generated content (UGC) websites (e.g. weblogs, micro-blogs), which are believed to underpin the democratic nature of the internet as it exists today (Song 2010). However, if one follows this rather binary approach in terms of what is now possible with the Web 2.0 and which was not previously possible at the time of Web 1.0, it is helpful to recall the similarly utopian appraisals of that earlier version of internet, including Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* and Castell's *Information Age* trilogy. As a matter of fact, one can find very similar expectations and descriptions of the internet as an enabling and, democratising technology in such writings. Hence, when answering the first question concerning the connection between prosumption and technology, one can state that the backbone technology *per se* has not

really changed at all. That is to say, the underlying internet architecture is still very much the same, whereas, of course, bandwidth capacities etc. have improved immensely over the past decade. What has also changed, is the availability of software tools to enable quick and easy publication on the world wide web, meaning that it is no longer only HTML experts and programmers that can contribute content online. Lay people can now do so too, through the simple use of intuitively accessible WYSIWYG[1] editors and other content creation tools.

What then does this mean for audience research? Despite the fact that Web 2.0 (or rather certain software products that are associated with the term Web 2.0) *facilitates* active interaction and collaboration, this does not mean that everybody engages in it, or that everybody can be called a prosumer. When we talk about the social or participatory web, we therefore need to ask which users or audiences are included. On the other hand - and this takes us to the second question as to what role audiences play in connection with prosumption - even though Twitter, for example, is ultimately used by only a rather small percentage of the population, the technology as such has already altered some parts of our political and social life. Micro-blogging and other web 2.0 technologies have also greatly influenced media production processes, particularly in relation to journalism. Examinations of 'participatory' journalism (Singer et al 2011) depict how modern-day journalists draw on Twitter and other unofficial sources. The consequences are manifold and demand new theoretical and practical approaches to questions such as gatekeeping, agenda setting, etc. (Hermida 2010, 2012; Bruns 2005).

The "boom in interest in, and work on, the prosumer and the process of prosumption" (Ritzer, Dean and Jurgenson 2012, 380) often depicts in the first place the internet user and does not use the concept of audience. Theoretical work tends to reflect on ideas from value co-creation to wikinomics and productive consumption (ibid.), where it is primarily the transformation of the individual from a passive user to an active prosumer that is discussed. The notion of audience comes into play only in an indirect sense, when using a meta perspective that assumes that the multitude of individual users form a considerably influential and powerful public. This new public, takes on the role of prosumers, participating in producing different content online, be this through explicit opinions and discussions expressed via weblogs and newsgroups, or indirectly - i.e. passively - through their online behaviour when consuming news online through individually chosen sources.

The idea of user-generated content as it relates to the concept of prosumption also refers to the

[1] What You See Is What You Get.

notion of online social media as a two-way communication medium (Gulbrandsen and Just 2011). This means that both content receivers and content providers (if one can still differentiate between two distinct sides at all) take up the twin roles of consumers as well as producers of content.

Jensen's approach to the social web and online communication not only states that online communication can also be categorised as many-to-many communication (in addition to the traditional distinction between one-to-one and one-to-many communication), but that social media also can be integrated into the analytical framework of network, mass and interpersonal communication by means of a three-step flow:

> The contemporary media environment may be approached as a three-step flow of network, mass and interpersonal communication. Whereas the two-step flow comprised mass media and humans as embodied media, digital media have added a third type of step to the flow or process of communication, which thus extends into additional social networks and contexts of interaction. (Jensen and Helles 2011, 258; see also Jensen 2009; 2010).

Whereas this approach allows us to focus on the communication processes of social media, a further potential connection between the concept of prosumption and audience research is provided by Bruns's cultural studies approach to prosumption in terms of the produser,[2] providing "a more active - a more productive - role for the consumer (or interpreter) of media" (Ritzer, Dean and Jurgenson 2012, 386). With his notion of the consumer as interpreter, we can also refer to Thorson's discussion of news consumption, participation, and the changing concept of the public. She uses the example of online news recommendation engines (NREs), which are basically "aggregators of public opinion like the 'most emailed' or 'most viewed' lists" and "represent an aggregate of individuals acting as an institution: the public" (Thorson 2008, 275). The author sees NREs as a direct way for the public to become active through the provision of opinions. Furthermore, NREs have the potential to influence other readers' attitudes towards particular pieces of content (ibid.), which means that the public can also shape and influence opinions. From this, we can conclude that prosumption does represent an important aspect of discussions over the role of audiences as an influence-exerting public. What is actually new in the public's exertion of such influence at a social, political, as well as economic, level is the directness with which it can be achieved. For example, in the past, the public's political opinion could be made visible in audience research through reactive instruments, such as surveys on political opinions and voting behaviours. Today, such political opinion is actively communicated by publics through various social web

[2] For a more detailed overview of Bruns concept of produsage, see Bruns 2007 & 2010.

applications including weblogs, newsgroups, and NREs. This means that audience researchers have to re-think their methodological approaches, that is they need to "redevelop or reinvent the analytical methodologies and categories that were coined in the epoch of mass communication, when interpersonal and face-to-face communication were nearly synonymous" (Jensen and Helles 2011, 521), and adapt those to the new modes of communication in the process of prosumption.

4. Audience Activism

A second example of audience practice often considered central to contemporary media culture is that of audience activism, which is also associated with the internet and the participatory potential of social media. Central to the notion of audience activism is a sense of empowerment given to audiences and resistance to the mainstream. Ross and Nightingale (2003), characterise audience activism as deriving from the 'desperation' of audience communities to allow them 'to present stories, ways of thinking and cultural histories that are fundamental to their (personal) identity survival, but which are neglected in mainstream media's programming (p.42). In a more overtly political fashion, activism within an audience context today more often refers to how transformations in communications technologies can help audiences use and develop their own media to challenge mainstream political representations and support alternative opportunities for intervention (de Jong, et al 2005). The evolution of political activism from, for example, the Tiananmen Square uprising of 1989, where the main technology of news communication was that of the fax machine connection (Calhoun 1989), to the "spring revolution" in Egypt or Libya with its use of mobile phones and social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, provides an illustration of the central role of technology in activism. However, the main question here concerns the role of the audience and how with the evolution and transformation of media cultures activism signifies new forms of mediated social relationships?

If, within the traditional media paradigm, the concept of active audiences for newspapers, radio or television was linked with the concept of the public sphere (Habermas 1964/1974), it is clear that the internet has greatly increased and extended the reach of information and debate (Sparks 2005). To date, the idea of the active audience has been applied to popular cultural consumption, in an attempt to develop a transforming cultural activism based on the participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). Political activism, as well as cultural activism, is associated with the notion of resistance. Duncombe (2002) defines cultural resistance as "culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and / or change the dominant political, economy, and/or social

structure". Therefore, some of the audience dynamics that we present connect with concepts of both activism and resistance.

Media activism has often been associated with the concept of alternative media such as community radio or 'zines. Audiences and readers of alternative forms of media have, normally, an active profile and "alternative-media activists represent in a sense the most active segment of the so-called active-audiences" (Downing 2003).

A good example of this version of audience activism is that of community and pirate radio. Based on the power of radio as a distribution apparatus with the potential to empower the audience (Brecht, 1964 [1932]), active radio audiences and listeners have, in different moments of radio history, appropriated the technology of broadcasting to challenge the mainstream, first through Hertzian waves and now, via the internet. Nowadays, the proliferation of community radio around the world is central to challenging political corruption, supporting transitional democracies and broadcasting voices of civil society that are otherwise unheard (Gordon 2012). In addition, citizens and listeners have also activated streaming and podcast channels through a remediation of traditional sound activism. Two examples of networked movements that used radio communication in support of their objectives are the Madrid (15M Movement) and the New York (Occupy Wall Street) protests in 2011. Both movements shared the idea of a rebellion against consolidated democracies. In both cases, established media, public and private, were among the democratic institutions called into question.

In Spain, around May 2011, an important stream of change began in Spanish civil society, supported by the extensive use of social networks. Drawing on the idea of a networked public sphere (Benkler 2006), the so-called "Spanish revolution", which evolved around Sol Square in Madrid, became a social movement in which, quoting Manuel Castells, "the disgust became a network" (Beas 2011). Many Spanish community radio stations, following the lead of the original project Agora Sol Radio (www.agorasolradio.org) created a situation within which sound activists became the "voice of the 15M", the name given to the protest movement which was launched at a gathering on May 15, one week before local elections. In 2012, Agora Sol Radio continues to webcast programming in sixteen regular radio formats via its website with an internal structure based on self-management. Similarly, the Occupy Wall Street movement established a micro-radio station (107.1 FM), simulcasting on the internet (Radiosurvivor.com, 2011), to provide comprehensive coverage of daily protest information.

A wider discussion, led by Jenkins among others, is currently underway regarding the activist and the critical engagement potential of participatory culture. The project "From Participatory Culture

to Public Participation" (2012) is currently a work in progress, developed by Jenkins' research team at USC, explores the continuities between online participatory culture and civic engagement. Based on a series of case studies (Rang de Basanti, Racebending, Harry Potter Alliance, Invisible Children), the project explores the 'new forms of social organising and action as we map the trajectory from popular media fandom to political engagement'.[3] This project is based on the idea that "fan and consumer activism are more visible than ever before, and the lines between these and traditional civic and political activities are blurring in today's increasingly "participatory" media and entertainment landscape" (Brough and Shresthova 2012).

A good illustration of cultural activism is the concept of fan festivals. Here, cultural activism can be recognised as attempts to protect the public cultural sphere (media, arts, institutions) or, as Jenkins argues, "fan attempts to protect texts they see as meaningful represent similar efforts to shape the cultural environment" (Jenkins 2012). From their origins in 1960s counterculture to today's big business of music festivals, the phenomenon of fan-based non-profit festivals has emerged in opposition to the purely commercial concept of a popular music festival. Whether from a feminist approach, such as Ladyfest (Gallego 2009), or from an aesthetic and stylistic point of view, including the example of Popfest, these are examples that share a 'do it yourself', self-management and anti-capitalist approach to cultural organisation. It is interesting, in this context, to observe the evolution of cultural resistance and the development of connections between fans around the world. Popfest began in New York City in 1995, where it drew on the fanbase of the early forum list, indiepop (now twee.net). Additional occurrences of the festival subsequently took place in various other United States cities and in 2009 European indiepop fans celebrated the first international Popfest in London. Madrid hosted Popfest in 2011 and, again, in 2012, springing from a similar starting point, the internet forum, People Like Us and operating under a manifesto that underlies its non-profit and authentic character faced with "the media and commercial power that tries to instil taste, fashion and tends based on economics and non-artistic interests"[4].

5. Conclusion

Prosumption and audience activism highlight two modes of emerging audience practice, based around connected social relationships through contemporary media. While both pre-existed the internet they are now, as we have argued, massively extended through the affordances of new media culture. Prosumption, a notion prefigured in earlier discourses about the Information Society, is a

[3] https://sites.google.com/site/participatorydemocracyproject/
[4] See www.madridpopfest.com

concept whose time has come, because of technological developments that lower the barriers to entry, and due to the empowering of audiences through greater media literacy as well as connectivity. In the case of audience activism, a model of 'convergence activism' is in evidence across numerous contemporary examples of audiences using technologies of communication and social media connections to organise, to resist and to engage in collective action independently of established social, political and media organisations.

But what role do social relationships play in connection with these concepts of prosumption and activism? To date, various studies have, for example, looked at identity building with social media and, relatedly, at the influence of social media on social relationships. Important as this question is, one must always remember the low penetration rate of active social media usage. Audience research, therefore, needs to ask, first, who is actually using social media, and, second, who is a prosumer or media activist? As various statistics show, the penetration rate of social media usage varies greatly in different cultures, with Western countries such as Canada ranking among the highest. Hence, audience research in this field tends to focus on these cultures, and "neglecting developments within populations communicating online in other languages" (Danet and Herring 2003). Secondly, even among those cultures that audience research tends to focus on, we can find great demographic differences. For example, those users that are actively contributing to the so-called participatory web are often to be found among the younger generations (Busemann and Gscheidle 2010). Even here, claims about the creativity productivity of 'digital natives' are often found to be exaggerated (Livingstone and Helsper 2007). Consequently, if we only address social relationships in conjunction with social media use and concepts of prosumption and activism, we risk arriving at research results that are limited in terms of demographic and cultural representativeness. The challenge, therefore, is to find approaches that extend the analysis of social relationships across different age groups as well including different nationalities and language groups. Comparative studies are one possible answer to this challenge, which means that audience studies need to expand not only their concrete samples but also - realistically speaking - their collaborative scope. This means that, apart from the aforementioned necessary revisions to methodological approaches, audience studies also need to embrace the idea of engaging more in international project collaborations that enable researchers to conduct studies with a broader sample. Interestingly enough, technology and social media can also play an important role here, as they enable large project collaborations through so-called e-science networks (Jankowski 2007; Nentwich 2009; Schroeder 2008). The term e-science refers to large-scale scientific projects that are carried out with locally dispersed collaborators, and which provide access to "large data collections, very large scale computing resources and high performance visualization back to the

individual user scientists" (Jankowski 2007, 551). Hence, these networks allow audience researchers to address social relationships and their transformations with different questions that also integrate necessary broader angles. Finally, such studies also add an interesting twist by turning audience researchers into prosumers: e-science networks not only enable individual researchers or research teams to produce research results by means of large scale computing resources, they also enable the *usage* or consumption of other collaborators' results and data collections regarding the integration into, for example, joint comparative studies.

From an audience studies perspective, it is important to look beyond the rhetoric of an over-celebratory approach towards new media. Instead, the focus needs to be on those issues and challenges that face audience researchers in relation to the task of adding knowledge about a complex and evolving new media environment. As discussed above, these challenges are both methodological and empirical. The dispersed, globalised and distributed nature of contemporary audience activity is such that traditional research methods struggle to capture experiences and forms of practice that are, in themselves, fluid and constantly changing. Here, both technology and new emerging forms of institutionalised knowledge and new approaches to industry measurement may assist. Yet, what remains central to the audience research process is the need to understand processes of meaning-making and audience activity, regardless of how natural (or how complex) they may appear to be.

References

Ang, Ien. 1991. *Desperately Seeking the Audience*. London: Routledge.

Beas, Diego. 2011. "How Spain's 15-M movement is redefining politics." *The Guardian*. http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/15/spain-15-m-movement-activism

Benkler, Yochai. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bennett, Susan. 1997. *Theatre Audiences* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Brecht, Bertolt. (1964 [1932]) "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication." In *Brecht on Theater* ed. J. Willet, 53–54. New York: Hill and Wang.

Brough, Melisaa and Shresthova, Sangita. 2012. "Fandom meets activism: Rethinking civic and political participation." *Transformative Works and Cultures,* 10. http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/303/265

Bruns, Axel. 2005. *Gatewatching: Collaborative online news production*. New York: Peter Lang.

Bruns, Axel. 2007. "Produsage." http://produsage.org

Bruns, Axel. 2010. "Vom Prosumenten Produtzer". In *Prosumer Revisited: Zur Aktualitaet einer Debatte*, ed. B. Blaettel-Mink & K.-U. Hellmann. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaften.

Busemann, Katrin and Gscheidle, Christoph. 2010. "Web 2.0: Nutzung steigt - Interesse an aktiver Teilhabe sinkt." *Media Perspektiven*, 7-8: 359-368.

Butsch, Richard. 2000. *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Butsch, Richard. 2008. *The citizen audience: crowds, publics, and individuals*. London: Taylor and Francis.
Butsch, Richard. 2011. "Audiences and Publics, Media and Public Spheres." In *The Handbook of Media Audiences,* ed. V. Nightingale, 149-168. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
Calhoun, Craig. 1989. "Tiananmen, Television and the Public Sphere: Internationalization of Culture and the Beijing Spring of 1989." *Public Culture* 2(1): 54-71.
Couldry, Nick. 2012. *Media, Society, World. Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Danet, Brenda and Herring, Susan C. 2003. "Introduction: The Multilingual Internet." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 9(1): 0-0.
de Jong, Wilma, Shaw, Martin, and Stammers, Neil. 2005. *Global activism, global media*. London: Pluto Press.
Douglas, Susan. 1999. *Listening In. Radio and the American Imagination*. New York: Times Books.
Downing, John. D. H. 2003. "Audiences and readers of alternative media: the absent lure of the virtually unknown." *Media, Culture & Society*, 25: 625-645.
Duncombe, Stephen. 2002. *Cultural resistance reader*. New York: Verso.
Gallego, J. Ignacio. 2009. "Do It Yourself. Cultura y Tecnología." *Revista Icono*, 14(13): 278-291.
Gordon, Janey. 2012. *Community Radio in the Twenty-first Century*. London and New York: Peter Lang.
Green, Andrew. 2010. *From Prime Time To My Time: Audience Measurement in the Digital Age*. London: WARC.
Gulbrandsen, Ib. T., and Just, Sine. N. 2011. "The collaborative paradigm: towards an invitational and participatory concept of online communication." *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(7): 1095-1108.
Habermas, Jurgen. 1964/1974. "The public sphere: An encyclopedic article." *New German Critique*, 1: 49-55.
Hermida, Alfred. 2010. "From TV to Twitter: how ambient news became ambient journalism." *M/C Journal,* 13(2). http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/220
Hermida, Alfred. 2012. "Tweets and truth: Journalism as a discipline of collaborative verification." *iFirst*, March 27.
Jankowski, Nicholas. W. 2007. "Exploring e-Science: An Introduction." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(2): 549-562.
Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual poachers : television fans & participatory culture*. New York ; London: Routledge.
Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence culture : where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
Jenkins, Henry. 2012. " "Cultural acupuncture": Fan activism and the Harry Potter Alliance." *Transformative Works and Cultures,* 10. http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/305
Jensen, Joli. 1984. "An interpretive approach to culture production". In *Interpreting Television: Current Research Perspectives* eds. W. D. Rowland and Bruce Watkins, 98-118. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
Jensen, Joli. 1992. "Fandom as pathology: the consequences of characterization." In *The Adoring audience: fan culture and popular media,* ed. Lisa A. Lewis, 9-30. London: Routledge.
Jensen, Klaus B. 2009. "Three-step flow." *Journalism*, 10(3): 335-337.
Jensen, Klaus B. 2010. *Media Convergence: The Three Degrees of Network, Mass, and Interpersonal Communication*. London Routledge.
Jensen, Klaus B., & Helles, Rasmus. 2011. "The internet as a cultural forum: Implications for research." *New Media & Society*, 13(4): 517-533.

Lindlof, Thomas R. 1988. “Media audiences as interpretive communities.” In *Communication Yearbook Vol 11,* ed. John Anderson, 81-107. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
Lindlof, Thomas. R., and Grodin, Debra. 1990. ”When Media Use Can’t Be Observed: Some Problems and Tactics of Collaborative Audience Research.” *Journal of Communication*, 40(4): 8-28.
Livingstone, Sonia and Helsper, Ellen. 2007. “Gradations in digital inclusion: children, young people and the digital divide.” *New Media Society*, 9(4): 671-696.
Lunt, Peter. K. and Livingstone, Sonia M. 2012. *Media regulation: governance and the interests of citizens and consumers*. London: Sage.
Napoli, Philip M. 2003. *Audience economics : media institutions and the audience marketplace*. New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press.
Nentwich, Michael 2009. *Cyberscience 2.0 oder 1.2? Das Web 2.0 und die Wissenschaft*. Wien: Institut für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung.
Nightingale, Virginia. 2004. “Television audiences: publics, markets, communities and fans.” In *Sage Handbook of Media Studies,* ed. John D. H. Downing, 227-249. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Nightingale, Virginia, ed. 2011. *The Handbook of Media Audiences*. Oxford: Blackwell.
O’Reilly, Tim. 2005. “What is Web 2.0? Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software.” O’Reilly Blog, from http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html
Radiosurvivor.com. 2011. “Occupy Wall Street occupy the airwaves too.” 9th October 2011. http://www.radiosurvivor.com/2011/10/09/occupy-wall-street-occupies-the-airwaves-too/
Radway, Janice A. 1984. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
Radway, Janice A. 1999. *A feeling for books: the Book-of-the-Month Club, literary taste, and middle-class desire*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
Ritzer, George, Dean, Paul and Jurgenson, Nathan. 2012. “The Coming of Age of the Prosumer American.” *Behavioral Scientist*, 56(4): 379-398.
Ross, Karen and Nightingale, Virginia. 2003. *Media and audiences : new perspectives*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
Scherer, Jay and Rowe, David. 2012. *Sport, Public Broadcasting, and Cultural Citizenship: Signal Lost?* London: Routledge.
Schroeder, Roland. 2008. “e-Sciences as research technologies: reconfiguring disciplines, globalizing knowledge.” *Social Science Information*, 47(2): 131-157.
Singer, Jane B., Hermida, Alfred, Domingo, David, Heinonen, Ari, Paulussen, Steve, Quandt, Thorsten, Reich, Zvi eds.. 2011. *Participatory Journalism*. *Guarding open gates at online newspapers*. Wiley-Blackwell.
Song, Felicia W. 2010. “Theorizing Web 2.0.” *Information, Communication & Society,* 13(2): 249–275.
Sparks, Colin. 2005. “Media and the global public sphere: An evaluative approach.” In *Global activism global media,* eds. Wilma de Jong, Martin Shaw and Neil Stammers, 34-49. London: Pluto Press.
Tapscott, Don and Williams, Anthony D. 2007. *Wikinomics : how mass collaboration changes everything*. London: Atlantic Books.
Thorson, Emily. 2008. “Changing patterns of news consumption and participation.” *Information, Communication and Society,* 11(4): 473-489.
Toffler, Alvin. 1980. *The Third Wave*. London: Pan Books.
Tracey, Michael. 1998. *The decline and fall of public service broadcasting*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Turow, John. 2011. *The Daily You: How the Advertising Industry Is Defining Your Identity and Your World: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Webster, James G. 1998. “The Audience.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* 42(2): 190-207.
Webster, James G., Phalen, Patrick. F. and Lichty, Lawrence. W. 2005. *Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice: The Theory and Practice of Audience Research.* London: Routledge.