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The Future of Audience Research

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ECREA roundtable

The future of audience research

IAMCR conference @ BRAGA

July 21 14:30-16:00

Convenor: Nico Carpentier

The value of audience research

- *The value of the concept:* An implied question mark in the title? Is its future in doubt, no longer adequate to the task, in need of reorganisation. Yet, “If we didn’t have it, we’d have to invent it”. Is there a crisis?
- *What is valuable about audience studies* - the emphasis on agency which has acted as a fulcrum within media studies for debates about **power, resistance, participation**. Also, has represented a strong tradition of **empirical research** and real world relevance. As such remains an anchor for media and communication research and a touchstone for new theoretical development.
- *A tradition with a history as well as a research concept with extraordinary historiographical potential*– we also need to remind ourselves and our students about the enduring history underpinning audience reception (McQuail). A century of media effects is also a century of media reception which has a rich and varied history and is itself an important and rich research field (Morley 1985)

Global Contexts of Reception

- IAMCR Audience Section “encourages new thinking and approaches to audience research and aims to inspire greater interest in exploring and understanding audiences in diverse settings. Critiques of popular market research strategies and opinion polls and analyses of the profitable sale of audiences to sponsors and owners are welcome. This section is also enthused by investigations of the appropriateness of ‘Western’ theories and methods in ‘other’ settings”.
- A unique international space for knowledge exchange about thematic concerns, of methodologies, highlighting global diversity and of course, reflecting the global/local dimension of audience

Global Contexts of Reception

- Some random examples from this year's conference including
 - *texting practices of audience commentary in Zimbabwe*
 - *post-war experiences of cinema audiences in Ghent*
 - *online experiences young people in rural Cumbria*
 - *Portuguese children's recognition of brands*
 - *Japanese experience of constant mobile communication*
 - *public health slogans and murals in China*
- What underpins this is promotion of:
 - a body of knowledge about the audience;
 - a tradition of theorising concepts about audience;
 - a prioritisation of the audience experience;
 - and diversity of methods required for research

Future orientations/1

COST Action *Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies*:

- **Problem 1: Hybridisation**
The media and communication landscape is increasingly hybridised – the private becomes public, the ordinary articulates with both popular and elite forms, fiction merges with reality.
- **Problem 2: Interaction, participation and communication**
With the advent of Web 2.0, audience research has embraced the concepts of interaction and participation, focusing on a range of 'ordinary' content producers such as bloggers and social network users.
- **Problem 3: Technology**
Research on ICT use examines the factors affecting the diffusion, appropriation and consequences of new technologies and applications (e.g. mobile phones, Web 2.0 tools).
- **Problem 4: Social networks**
Audience researchers need to examine in what ways media and communication technologies affect the social dimension of audiencehood, as many social networks rest on chosen, weak and sometimes continuously changing relationships, motivated by shared interests or lifestyles and primarily organised heterarchically rather than hierarchically.

Future orientations/2

- A theme: **New media genres, media literacy and trust in the media** institutional and critical perspectives on audience representation, i.e., how audience experience is formally accounted for through institutional processes of research (media literacy indices for instance) or through representative bodies such as Audience Councils. In other words, an area of overlap between audience studies and public policy debates, advocating that researchers should try to make their findings more widely available and understood in professional media environments.
- Revisit the theme of the institutional understanding of the audience raised by Ien Ang (1991) in the context of television.
- Issues now even more pointed and relevant given that institutional knowledge is more powerful and more detailed, all the more need for a very strong commitment to promotion of audience understanding.
- In this context, what ways are available for the audience, institutionally defined, to act, to respond, to influence policy agendas. Spaces do exist within the public regulatory spaces for audience intervention and these need to be promoted and extended, rather than criticized from the sidelines. These include audience councils, community media cooperatives, as well as the range of new opportunities for policy engagement brought about by media literacy.

Future orientations/3

An example:

- Audiences and the switchover to digital television. A close link here to issues of media literacy as a policy and the question of trust in media institutions. Origins in European Parliament activism in light of the AVMSD.
- A suite of transformative changes for the media landscape, old and new. How the public interest is represented in this process
- A connection here also with the notion of communication rights. Rights which need to be articulated through a public service charter, a code of practice, right of reply and representation in policy process.
- Example of Irish broadcasting legislation whereby community media enabled a new emphasis on ML in the Broadcasting Act (2009) and that a new sphere of public policy would get investment from traditional psb funding.