

Researching Media Audiences



Lecture 2: Audience Formations and Audience Research

Defining the Audience

- ◎ Formations of people
- ◎ Power relations
- ◎ Importance of research

The Developing Audience

- Audiences are becoming increasingly complex.
- Some events invite the audience to take part through voting – BigBrother, X-Factor
- Environment still governed by power relationships.
- Mass audience of the 20th century replaced by audience formations in the 21st century.

History of the Audience

- History of the audience is related to public (spaces)
e.g. Greek and Roman public life took place in public spaces - theatres and forums (see Sullivan, 2013 Ch.1)
- Invention of printing press led to mediated audiences not oral audiences
- 17th Century - the crowd was “mindless, ignorant, defenceless, naïve and manipulated or exploited.” Powerful institutions like the Roman Catholic church gained power over the people using the written word
- 18th C – the Enlightenment - John Locke, John Stuart Mill argued that ordinary citizens should govern themselves

History of the Audience cont.

- 19th C – feared because of their agency
- 20th C – film/radio/TV leads to rise of the “mass audience” - passive, susceptible to political and social propaganda of large conglomerates
- 21st C – rise of the Internet leads to notions of online audiences, and social media audiences – active AND passive

Is Social Media accurate?

- ⦿ Boston bombings were covered by mass media AND social media (bystanders had phones)
- ⦿ Mass media mistakenly identified 2 Chechen brothers (and others)
- ⦿ Social media made same mistakes, especially Reddit.com

Audiences as Publics

- Essential in a democracy
- Utilises the public sphere
- Mass media can control and dumb down public discourse

Audiences as Markets

- ◉ Essential in a capitalist society.
- ◉ The market manages populations on behalf of institutional interests.
- ◉ Mass media is a tool to promote consumerism.
- ◉ Audiences become units sold to advertisers.

What are Publics?

- ◎ People in public discussion.
- ◎ The press became integral to national publics
- ◎ Do media control publics?
- ◎ Are the media a tool for publics?

Views of media audiences

There are 4 competing views of media audiences:

1. Media audiences as Public Good
2. Media audiences as Marketplaces
3. Media audiences as Communities
4. Media audiences as Producers

Mass Media as a Public Good

- ⦿ Powerful connection between the individual and the Public Sphere.
- ⦿ Media represents the public to itself
- ⦿ Problems occur when the mass media itself is influenced by government, private sector, or individuals
- ⦿ Recent media reports re Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd are not neutral not solely informative

Mass Media as a Marketplace

- ⦿ TV media content is produced for profit
- ⦿ Media space can be used to sell commodities to audiences via advertising
- ⦿ Focus on maintenance of capitalism
- ⦿ Audience research focuses on ratings and market share

Effects Research in Media

- ⦿ Typical of academic communication/health research
- ⦿ Affected by prevailing social and cultural concerns
- ⦿ Assesses the efficiency of marketing strategies
- ⦿ Effects of violent media on children
- ⦿ Effects of pornography on adults
- ⦿ Hypodermic needle model of media

Models of Media Effects

- ◉ Typically looks at violence and sex video games -> violence, pornography -> rape, attitudes, identity
- ◉ Confusing, not transferable
- ◉ Effects small or non-existent
- ◉ The power of the media is likely to be as a probable explanation, not as a cause.

Models of Media Communication

- Context affects the receipt of a message
- Lasswell's model – “who says what to whom in what channel to whom with what effect”
- As amended:
SENDER → (other factors) → **MESSAGE** →
(other factors) → **RECEIVER**
- Stuart Hall worked with cultural context

Media Audiences as Communities

- ⦿ Communal nature of cultural expression
- ⦿ The general public responds to mass media
- ⦿ Consumers respond to advertisements
- ⦿ Introduces ethnographic research

Ethnographic research

- Originally used by anthropologists to study “primitive” cultures in situ
- Now used by media academics to study all kinds of cultures and subcultures
- The ordinary things we do are studied to examine how we see the world and ourselves
- See video: [Anthropological take on social networking](#)

Media Audiences as Producer

- ◎ 21st C technologies – YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, reality TV, hypertext novels, mobile phone apps
- ◎ No single sources of media, and multiple reception platforms
- ◎ Problems arise in terms of ethics, accuracy, credibility

Ethics issues re audiences as producers

If someone says something on someone else's
Facebook page, who is responsible?

Answer: the owner of the Facebook page.
High Court of Australia, reported by ABC News,
6 August 2012.

Latest Twitter abuse