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□ Napoli, Philip M.:

Audience Economics: Media Institutions and the Audience Marketplace

New York: Columbia State University Press (2003). ISBN 0231-12653-0 (pbk), pp. 235

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A Review by Martin Barker

This book belongs within a domain that it is important to know about, even if it is very different from the kind of work that most readers of this Journal are likely to try to practice. Philip Napoli is theorising and exploring the nature and functions of audience research as conducted either by media organisations themselves, or by specialist commercial organisations such as Nielsen, in order to set the price for advertising on television, radio, in magazines and newspapers, and on the Internet. Its focus, therefore, is entirely on advertising-financed media, and the ways in which audience research plays a vital but little-explored role within the operations of these.

This book can usefully be read in connection with two other traditions and bodies of work (some of which, indeed, he himself references). There is the political economy tradition, which looks at the broad consequences for media content of systems of ownership and control. With a long tradition of its own, from Dallas Smythe to Janet Wasko in the USA, and encompassing elsewhere the work of people such as Nicholas Garnham, Peter Golding and Graham Murdock in the UK, this tradition has been closely allied with Marxist and neo-Marxist critiques of the role of the media (it is worth recalling the debate some years ago over the concept of the 'audience commodity'). Meanwhile Len Ang's work was positioned with a suspicious, cultural studies-inflected approach which saw audience measurement through the lens of struggles for control – she saw an almost ontological struggle between anarchic audiences and machines of governance. Napoli stands elsewhere. He is looking at the audience measurement industry from the inside, and exploring its internal logics and crises.

Napoli argues that a central driver of the relations between advertisers and the media in which they place their products, is the congruence between three facets of audiences: the *predicted* audience, the *measured* audience, and the *actual* audience. By its nature, advertising has to operate in advance. Therefore the entire relations between media channels and advertisers depend upon the reliability of predictions based upon past performances. These in turn are based upon the various technologies, sampling practices and testing regimes which have led to established and agreed practices for deciding who, for instance, watches particular TV channels, or individual programmes, or who listens to a particular radio station. Finally, though, and partly (Napoli argues) because of competition between measuring devices, there is the factor of the *actual* audience, and the extent to which advertisers become aware of problems in the reliability

of the audience measurement procedures; or become discontented because accurate measurements are showing that they are not getting what they have been paying for.

Napoli has little interest in what audiences *actually do* with what they watch, read, listen to, or even with the extent of actual influence of advertising on their behaviour or sense of self or the world. Indeed, he argues at several points that it is almost a condition of this entire industry that one ignores these – trying to price advertising on the basis of its effective reach would be impossible, he argues. Instead he traces in great detail the evolution of technologies for measuring audiences, and identifies the points at which his three aspects of the ‘audience’ pull apart, and lead to tensions between content providers and deliverers, and advertisers.

At a number of points in the book, I couldn’t help feeling that he was walking the edge of a high level of technological determinism – that the problems with the audience measurement industry were primarily and effectively ones of the adequacy of the instruments. But actually I don’t think this captures the thrust of this book. In fact, I think that the supervenient model behind his argument is essentially Adam Smith’s “hidden hand”. There is a ‘given’ behind all that he says, and that is the price per member of the audience which advertisers pay. In an ideal world, given adequate information flows, advertisers would be able to know exactly what they were getting for their money; and the price would be logical. The book is premised on the thought that the information is not that reliable or adequate, and as a result advertisers have historically argued over the price – and with the increasing fragmentation of the audience (there are useful empirical data and sources on this in Napoli’s book), the system has been nearing crisis.

Napoli is not a doom merchant. He does not believe that the system will fail. But he obviously believes that there will be some quite deep-going reorganisations of the relations between channels, content providers and advertisers as a result of developments such as multiplication of distribution routes and channels, and the rise of personalised reception systems such as TiVo. This combination – of shifting technologies, shifting information bases, and a growing sense of the unreliability of old predictive bases is upsetting many relationships:

One study has estimated that personal video recorders alone will cost the television industry an estimated \$12 billion in advertising revenue by 2006 ... as advertisers reduce what they are willing to pay for television audiences and/or move some of their advertising dollars to other media. In a recent criticism of local television audience data, one advertising executive expressed advertisers’ growing frustration with traditional media: “It is so bad I would be surprised if anybody continued to spend money based on that information”. (p. 173)

This is a very interesting book. I don’t feel fully competent to evaluate it, but I sense that academic audience researchers need to try to understand it. It represents an outcrop of another whole notion of what an ‘audience’ is. You might almost say that for him an audience is whatever the instruments of measurement manage to capture – which, if not

too unfair, would be curiously illuminating. The only obvious point of intersection with what this Journal has tended to be interested in is an odd one. Napoli at various points introduces a concept of 'audience autonomy', which to him means primarily people's access to a wider range of choices. But there are odd resonances of a Fiskean notion of bloody-minded audiences de-Certeauing themselves around the place. I hope no-one will be put off by that!

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