

Review

Nico Carpentier, Kim Christian Schrøder and Lawrie Hallett (eds.), *Audience Transformations – Shifting Audience Positions in Late Modernity*. New York & Abingdon, Routledge & COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology), 2014. ISBN: 978-0-415-82736-2. 276pp. £80.00, Hardback.

Audience Transformations – Shifting Audience Positions in Late Modernity is a publication edited by Nico Carpentier, Kim Christian Schrøder and Lawrie Hallett, but written by a big group of scholars from a number of European countries. The book provides a 'state of play' of changes to European communicational practices. It provides an account of changing audience practices and positions in rapidly evolving new media environments and embeds the aforementioned changes in social, cultural, technological, ideological, economic and historical contexts. The central tenet of the book is that audiences do not only react to changing environments but are, at the same time, also influencing new media developments. This book, at the same time, looks into the future of the field of audience research, and identifies what needs to change for the field to keep up with the rapid developments of new media.

The editors claim to offer 'a near exhaustive mapping of contemporary audience practices and transformations – constituted by and constitutive of wider social cultural transformations in late modernity' (p.10). This is a very ambitious endeavour which, it could be argued, can only be achieved when radically new ways of producing and providing content are used as well. The editors have, arguably, come close to achieving their aim. This is provided that 'new media audiences' are considered exclusively and not, as the title of the book suggests, 'audiences' in a general and more inclusive sense. This book manages substantial inroads into audiences' new media environments and practices. The authors are successful in shedding light on new genres, cross media use, audiences of public and private television broadcasting, media participation and the prerequisites of media participation. It is a laudable attempt at getting to grips with, firstly, current developments in evolving audience practices, secondly, complex new media environments and, thirdly, with the process of producing an account of the former.

The book provides new insights into changes occurring in new media audience practices and environments. It is structured into four parts: Use of Media; Audiences' complex structures; Audience participation; and the Prerequisites of participation, each part

consisting of three to four articles. The first part, 'Using the Media', focuses on the question of the use of new genres. It argues that cross-media use is resulting in the creation of new roles for audiences. The second part attempts to unpack some of audiences' complex structures. It looks at how different generations, minorities and networks use media in different ways and are – in turn – constituted by those kinds of media. The third part of the book deals with participation in and through the media, investigating political and media participation, civic participation, new perspectives on audience activities and the role of the media industry. The fourth part focuses on the prerequisites of participation: access, literacies and trust. This part looks at digital divides in the context of different nations, at media literacies in different media environments. It also approaches the question what it means to trust the media.

The editors have opted to rise to the challenge of new media audiences and adopted cooperative ways of producing content. The process of writing this book, therefore, deserves a special mention and particular consideration. *Transforming Audiences* was written by 57 authors from 21 countries - essentially - in working groups and supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) and a COST Action called TATS (Transforming Audiences – Transforming Society). This experimental way of writing deserves recognition as it uses collaborative ways of producing content. This courageous undertaking dares to approach the complex field of new media audience practices and environments through bringing together a big group of scholars of the field of Communication Studies to contribute to common areas of interest. This experiment is successful and could serve as a collaborative publishing model for complex and evolving subjects. Carpentier, Schrøder and Hallett might have provided the academic world and the interested public with a blueprint of 'academic publishing 2.0' in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

The editors insist that audiences exist and that it is still justifiable to use the term. Carpentier, Schrøder and Hallett insist in sticking with the 'audience' and argue against looking for new concepts. However, a number of their authors disagree with this point of view. They argue that it is critical to search for new terms, concepts and to develop more adequate research methods and methodologies. Bjur, Schrøder, Hasebrink, Courtois, Adoni and Nossek¹ for example argue that in cross-media environments it makes little sense to insist on calling the users of different platforms and services 'audiences'. Instead, they call for the development and acceptance of more differentiating and specifying terms. Other authors also call for a fundamental switch from theory-focussed to audience/ user-focussed research.

One of the many strengths of this book, as mentioned above, is the experimental way in which it was produced. Another strength lies in the wide spectrum of practices and environments it covers. It is an advantage to draw on the expertise of a big group of scholars to provide insights into the 'state of play' of a rapidly evolving and constantly changing field. Another of the book's strengths is its clear and focussed outlook to the future of the field which will be dealt with later on.

It is one of the few and minor weaknesses of this book that it does not consistently establishing the borders between ‘new’, and in contrast, ‘established’ media audiences. This book shares with the field of audience studies (within the Communication Studies tradition) the need to clearly mark the context of particular audiences it is dealing with. *Audience Transformations* is, in actual fact, exclusively dealing with new media audiences. However, there is a need to address audiences of traditional and new media. It is, for example, understandable that the editors concentrate their efforts on changes in new media audience practices. However, while this is perfectly valid, the editors seem to sidestep the fact that traditional audiences practices are at the same time changing, too, and therefore worth engaging with. Another minor weakness of the book is that some articles seem to be written in a dense and technical language oriented towards specialist readers. It could be asked if the sometimes dense and technical style is caused by a lack of sufficient space in this publication. Is it possible that this style is an unintended consequence of the need to condense numerous points of view into the short space of an article? This begs the question if more space would help this publication to achieve its aims? The answer has to be yes, if accessibility and the engagement with wider and non-specialist audiences are seen as part of the books’ mission.

How does this book contribute to the wider field of audience research? There is a noticeable tendency in this publication to call for change in the way audience research on new media audiences is conducted. The irony of this publication’s focus on new media audiences is that the outcomes of this volume are equally relevant for researchers of established media/ art audiences. Its authors demand more empirical research, a rethinking of audience terminology, conceptual clarifications, integrative approaches to audience research, a review of methodological approaches, international project collaboration as well as methodological and empirical approaches which are adequate for dealing with complex and evolving media environments. The majority of authors also call for a fundamental shift from theory-focussed to audience/user-focussed research. To address these areas is, arguably, the most important contribution of this publication to the field of audience research in Communication Studies. In rendering the discussion about the future direction of the field open to discussion, the editors and contributors are making an important contribution – above and beyond the current ‘state of play’ – to the future of new media audience research, and opening a path which scholars from this and other fields might choose to take engage with.

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Note:

¹ 'Cross-Media Use – Unfolding Complexities in Contemporary Audiencehood', p. 15-29.