After the excitement: An introduction to the work of CEDAR

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Introduction

This Themed Section brings together the work done by CEDAR – an AHRC funded European consortium of audience researchers, who, at an early stage in their careers came together to map trends, gaps and priorities emerging over the past decade in the field. The consortium was born towards the end of European COST Action – Transforming Audiences Transforming Societies – which, over four years, reflected a substantial amount of passionate interest in the changing field of audience research. Media environments had changed, thereby putting question marks around our previously stable categories of texts and readers. The ways in which people engaged with their media environments, to what purposes, and in which ways – had all changed reflecting not only the affordances (Hutchby, 2001) of technologies around us, but the diverse ways in which people used the media in personal relationships, across distance and boundaries (Madianou & Miller, 2011), for a variety of political and civic purposes (Carpentier 2011, Livingstone, 2013). Ultimately, as it stood in 2015-2016 – audience research could only be defined with great difficulty, for it had spread its roots amongst a variety of sub-fields and new fields, and yet – people continued to do (their own kind of) audience research. So what had happened over the past decade that would allow audience researchers today to make sense of what the field looks like now? Which were the burning conversations and what new paradigms of looking at the field were being proposed?

As we know, media audiences are not solely a domain of interest for media researchers, for audiences are also, and have always been – families and individuals, communities and groups, publics, citizens, consumers, students, workers, tourists and visitors to public sites. The activities of audiences inside and outside the home, therefore, have interested sociologists, cultural theorists, political scientists, educators, the

government and the media itself. The findings about audiences and audience practices, existing in a dedicated, specialist sub-field of media studies, have clear implications across sectors and disciplines and yet many of these implications have not been drawn out to their fullest and communicated as clearly as possible outside the field. Society and popular media have long had concerns about the perceived vulnerabilities of audiences, many assumptions are made about the attitudes, tastes and preferences of audiences in all their different capacities, and as audiences are changing rapidly in a multimedia world, concerns about the (often perceived) vulnerability of audiences to media changes abound in the media.

The study of audiences, which means a study of uses and meanings made of media, media texts and contexts by people – is at a challenging crossroads now (see Livingstone, 2015). Stakeholders – in policy and industry – have little idea of the findings from over 6 decades of critical academic research on audiences. Indeed, stakeholder research and academic research seem to operate independent of each other. In parallel academic audience research has neither represented its findings consistently, nor regularly put them forward to stakeholders or responded to their concerns. Equally true is that the consolidation of current findings and trends in the field is a task yet to be undertaken. The rapid uptake of new technologies has left audience researchers both enthused and confused, many have left the arena of 'audience studies' to 'new media (user) research', some have claimed that we are in a 'post-audience' age, while others have continued working within the field. Two key challenges persist. First, as public discourse and popular media repeatedly show, audience researchers have not succeeded in conveying their findings to other sectors, thereby preventing the real, proven finding of an active, interpretive audience from reaching the realms of mass discourse where the image of the vulnerable and passive audience continues to persist. Second, audience research is yet to identify a core set of priorities and concepts with which it addresses the wide variety of media forms and technologies available today. Without these, a strong future agenda is difficult to devise. It is within this context that CEDAR has begun its work.

CEDAR – its scope and methodology

CEDAR – Consortium on Emerging Directions in Audience Research – in its first year of work has dedicated itself to conducting a systematic review of the state of the art in the field of audience studies. This phase aimed to identify a set of key themes emerging in the study of media audiences as it stands today in a complex multi-genre, multi-media context with diverse social, political, civic and cultural implications significant for a range of fields in the social sciences. This Themed Section brings out findings from this phase of work – the methodology for which we elaborate later. The second half of the consortium's intellectual work – to be done over 2016 and 2017 – will be a foresight exercise which will build upon the findings of the previous phase to present a research agenda for the field as it would stand 15 years down the line. In order to do this, the consortium, having used a systematic literature review already, will make use of two of the other most effective tools of foresight analysis – expert panels and scenario building.

The consortium is unique in that in its most part it is an initiative which brings together early career scholars, with the mentoring of senior academics. In addition to the original intellectual outputs of its work, the consortium has been building capacity in terms of resourcing the collaboration of a new generation of scholars. Over the past years, a few colleagues involved in the consortium have met and worked with each other. The mentioned COST action, the Taylor and Francis journal Communication Review 2013, and the International Communication Association have seen small, sporadic groups from amongst the consortium to present research to each other and wider audiences. Now, these dispersed groups of early career academics has come together and been joined by others in the form of a European consortium, led by Ranjana Das of the UK's University of Leicester and Brita Ytre-Arne of the University of Bergen, in Norway. Through workshops and in conducting collaborative research over time, CEDAR has enabled fuller and more extensive cooperation and engagement amongst this new generation of audience researchers.

In its first phase, CEDAR has worked in what we have called research clusters. These were formed through an inductive approach, as network members used intensive individual and group work, and mind mapping exercises to identify keywords central to audience research in the past decade, and worked together to critically review these and group them into clusters describing key areas of the field. Cluster leaders subsequently took charge of identifying central academic outlets, focusing on established international journals in media and communications research but also incorporating selected journals in other languages, journals from related fields, and other outputs such as reports, books, dissertations and conference proceedings. Literature searches based on keywords led to the identification and collection of substantial bodies of literature, later to be reviewed by network members. Some of the chosen keywords were the same that guided the formation of the clusters, but importantly, the cluster structure also evolved over time, and within the clusters, keywords were critically discussed and evaluated, aiming for a qualitative, yet systematic approach to literature collection. Each cluster developed databases using Zotero referencing tools and consistently sharing references, notes and methodological considerations with network members within and across the clusters. The clusters were: Methods and Methodologies, Text-centric Audience Research, Audience Experiences, Participations and Publics, Invisible Audiences, and Design, Interfaces and Platforms.

In the next phase of review, all clusters adopted a set of criteria running across CEDAR, focusing on the identification of key themes while also mapping approaches, research questions, methods and findings. Each cluster worked with a shared spread sheet so that members could divide the tasks of reading and reviewing the clusters' body of literature, and decisions and methodological processes were also documented within each cluster and shared in the network. While the criteria were the same for all of CEDAR's work, leading up to the identification of key themes, the criteria were also adapted to the thematic focus of each cluster, which eventually made visible a variety of themes that would merit further consideration. Ideas for articles were formed and discussed in a CEDAR

workshop, author teams were established and continued to lead in-depth investigations of the most central questions that emerged from each cluster's work.

While the articles arising from this work form a crucial part of this Themed Section, our consortium has also paid attention to facilitating inter-cluster conversations – not only as part of CEDAR's work process, but also, most importantly, as a means of capturing cross-currents and tackling overarching questions and blurring boundaries between different areas of audience research. As a result, this volume also includes a series of shorter articles giving more specialized, but equally important discussions that enable us to address key themes in audience research from a variety of angles.

We have strived for our methodology to be rigorous, but this does not imply that all methodological approaches or analytical tools could quite simply be copied across clusters. Instead, the thematic focus of each cluster has led to careful methodological development, as well as reflection on individual and collective process in CEDAR. This was necessary in order to give a fair and fruitful reflection of the field we are reviewing, where the different themes of our clusters – and eventually of the articles in this volume – would necessitate partly different approaches. Particularly, as the work progressed, different author teams have chosen different paths, some conducting further searches or reviews according to their defined research questions and areas of interest. For instance, the work by Mathieu and members of the Methods and Methodologies cluster analysing the transition towards online audience research could hardly be conducted in the same manner as Kaun et al.'s search for invisible audiences. The first focuses on methodological development across a large body of literature stemming from a widely recognized priority area, while the second pays careful attention to aspects that have been marginalized or ignored, bringing into light selected contributions in order to assess if they could amend such imbalances. Importantly, such key analytical choices are described in the different articles in order to highlight connections between thematic focus and methodological development. One author team, the second from the Methods and Methodologies cluster, eventually extended their literature review on dialogue and boundary-making between audience research and other fields by also conducting interactive interviews with relevant scholars, thus truly committing to the dialogical aspect of their thematic interest.

This Themed Section reflects a considerable collaborative effort, only enabled through the dedication and skill of a coordinated consortium of this size and scope, which has resulted in a systematic literature review of audience research from the past decade. The review is systematic in structure, yet inductive in its fundamental approach and primarily qualitative in analysis, drawing on the scholarly judgement of careful reading in the identification of key themes. It incorporates research from various countries, disciplines and dissemination outlets, including and analysing these according to their thematic focus, and joining and comparing them with other works of similar thematic emphasis rather than grouping them according to origin. In so doing, we are aiming to produce a fruitful, useful and thought-

provoking overview and critical discussion of themes, developments, priorities and gaps in audience research in the past decade.

An introduction to this Section

So, in this Section we bring out the work done within the clusters of CEDAR we mentioned above – and much of this work is represented by our full-length articles in this volume. The shorter pieces represent work that has fruitfully occupied the boundaries of clusters. The articles here are by no means exhaustive or fully representative of the data CEDAR has collected and analysed over this past year, but they do represent the key themes of our work as we have seen arise in the past decade of audience studies. Broadly they address four themes – audiences in their roles as civic participants, audiences in their role as users of networked platforms, audiences and their interpretation of texts and global, bird's eye view issues about the field as a whole. We start and end with the last of these - taking a bird's eye view on key issues affecting the field in its entirety: Mathieu et al.'s longer paper in this volume speaks to some of these meta-challenges facing the field through a methodological lens. Addressing recent transformations in the media landscape, they address the role of the networked and the online in our considerations of research methods for audience research today. Their endeavor to map the past decade follows a set of themes which transcend a simple account of old methods and new methods, towards highlighting the difficulties to studying audiences amidst the convergence and digitalization of media, the circulation of meaning, the conceptualization of 'online audiences', the ethics and validity of research and finally the knowledge interests guiding its study. On a similar note, extending our bird's eye view of the field, in across-cluster commentary piece, Stehling et al. look at the past decade for the field through a comparative lens focusing on research that is either cross-media or cross-national, contextualizing their review against the field of comparative media research, and examining the conceptual frameworks and methods used in current comparative audience research, its contexts and its emerging trends. Next, Kaun et al. turn the focus on to the invisible – audiences who have not been studied, or studied only marginally in the midst of a rich and buzzing field. Their engaging inquiry into the invisibility of certain audiences hones in on post-socialist audiences, working class audiences and very young audiences – all of whom have had less than ideal amounts of scholarly attention in the literature over this past decade.

A second stream of articles in this volume focuses rightly on the huge amount of research that has happened over the past decade on the interfaces between audiences as users and technological platforms and their affordances. Pavlickova and Kleut in their cross-cluster commentary review the changes in discourses at the intersection of audiences interpreting texts actively and new forms of audience activity in contemporary text production and distribution, keeping their eye on neologisms such as prosumption and produsage. Their critical review focuses on two trends - produsage/prosumption as a form of relating to media texts and the produsage/prosumption as an experience in co-creation of texts. These 'texts' – the interfaces if one will, of the diversity of technological platforms

users interface on – form the central point of analysis for Mollen et al.'s commentary. Unlike Pavlickova and Kleut, they do not begin with the activity of audiences, but take off with a focus on the material artefacts that audiences engage with – whether we call them design, platforms or interfaces. Their account makes visible the manifold intentions and power dynamics that are objectified within technological platforms and how, if at all, these questions are getting conceptual and empirical attention within audience studies. Sitting somewhere between these two perspectives, a third article, by De Ridder et al., explores the tensions between the notion of 'user' and 'audience' through reviewing how studies on software designs, interfaces and platforms define the affordances of digital media. They spend time on the notion of 'affordances' to work towards an open definition for it that is non-functionalistic, non-structuralistic and carefully contextualized to specific practices of media use and their meanings Together these articles approach the user-platform interface from different standpoints with varying priorities, but they all speak to the relationship between technology and user, reminiscent of the relationship between texts and readers, media and audiences.

A third stream of articles in this volume look at the past decade of audiences as participants in civil society. Murru's theoretical commentary on a hermeneutic approach to audiences as civic participants is a novel line of inquiry. She grapples with how and if reflections on the civic relevance of interpretation in media audience studies can benefit from a hermeneutical approach to audiences as citizens. She says 'the hermeneutical approach sees citizenship not as a juridical category or a collection of civic attitudes, but as a dimension where the interpretative tasks of human condition are unfolded though the mutual shaping of a hermeneutic horizon – a worldview nurtured by traditions and institutions – a practice – a way of life that assumes social norms – and a textual reality, thought as a web of sentences and embodiment of principles and practices (Alejandro, 1993).' This revival of a theoretical tradition is a refreshing take on the myriad debates happening around audiences as publics and participants today. Murru et al., in their article, carry forward this focus on civic engagement drawing upon the review of the past decade of literature on publics and participation, as they aim to identify those dimensions of audiences that have been considered as having a civic/political resonance. Their first focus is on how the media is conceptualised in these conversations – examining areas of practice, interpretation and space and culture in the literature. Second, they connect these conceptualisations about the media to the conception of democracy and investigate the historical evolution of this civic/political salience in audience/user studies. Vesnic-Alujevic and Murru in their paper interrogate the celebratory optimism behind much literature on active and participatory audiences. They ask if the power of participatory and creative audiences extend beyond content creation or if the 'unpaid work of the users is a dominant theme of digital media analysis in the context of critical cultural studies'. In their review of the past decade they explore the tensions at the interstices of 'participation, empowerment, free labour and democratisation of production'.

Finally, audiences continue to persist as the readers and interpreters of texts. Dias

and Jorge in their commentary explore the mediated experiencing of emotions by reviewing the literature that has been produced over the past decade in audience studies around the emotions arising at the interface of readers and texts. Dealing with such broad categories as 'experiences' and 'emotions', they spot a sustained interest in related themes, such as memory, nostalgia, witnessing and distant suffering, that have been unevenly addressed and explored in the literature, studying different types of audiences, media and genres, using diverse methodologies, coming from varied empirical locations. On a similar note, with their eyes focused on texts and reception, Zaborowski and Dhaenens map approaches and conceptualizations of reception within the field since 2005, locating their work in the context of the reception of specific textual forms and formats – music and television. They ask if the 'hybridization of media also implies a hybridization of research traditions and methodologies, and what consequences it has for the balance between textual, production and audience approaches'. Taken together both papers keep a close eye on media as texts and audiences as readers.

Ending this issue, the final article returns to meta-perspectives concerning the field as a whole, but following a rather different format to the traditional research article. Mathieu et al investigate the central unease and difficulty in defining audiences or audience research today (See also Das, 2014). They combine the insights provided by CEDAR's review of literature with expert interviews of researchers who do engage in audience research in some form or the other but who identify with related or other fields of inquiry, such as literacy, development, design, technology, education, theater, etc. This speaks to one of the core reasons for this consortium coming together – to investigate the past, exciting, yet complex decade in a field that is increasingly difficult to define in the first place.

Conclusion

Together, the work of CEDAR as represented through the articles in this collection combines a bird's eye view of important developments in audience research in the last decade with in-depth investigations of some of the meanings and implications of these developments.

The broad themes into which the articles were organized above highlight some findings in themselves: we do find an increasing interest in audiences conceptualized as users of media technologies, resulting in various close examinations of engagement with technological capacities of media such as designs, interfaces and platforms. Likewise, the meta-review of methodology in transition towards online audience research finds an increasing emphasis on *use* standing out as a tendency reflected in methodological decisions and challenges. However, our attention also to text-centric research and audience experience supplement such understandings by highlighting continued investigations of dimensions such as identity and emotions – really transcending questions of old and new media. And, while we do find some shifts in emphasis concerning orientations towards use rather than reception, and technology rather than texts, we do find that established concepts from audience and reception research continue to be developed as key resources in understanding new audience engagements, as our discussion on produsage is one

example of. The particular decade that has been reviewed was a period when digital media was no longer solely a novel phenomenon of newsworthy attention, nor digitalization a crucial transforming factor causing change on many levels – rather, the period reflects that these developments needed to be integrated into understandings of audiences. Another of our broad themes, participation and civic dimensions of audiences, indicates that audience researchers have continued a long-standing interest in the political with attention to both old and new challenges and inequalities.

A main finding across articles is the increased *complexity* of audiences: theoretically, methodologically or empirically. Looking back at the first few CEDAR meetings we realise how long the network sat around a table trying to agree on what qualifies as audience research and where exactly we should go looking for it. Complexification as a potential convergent tendency in the field is, for instance, noted by Dias and Jorge in their analysis of mediated emotion, but echoes across different themes in our Themed Section as well. On a theoretical level, we have already noted the revisiting and development of key concepts, the attention to potential destabilization of important categories, and the continued contributions to conceptualizing democratically important topics such civic dimensions of audiences. Methodologically, our articles on methods represent investigations that focus particularly on the complexity of methodological rationales in audience research, examining challenges and blurring boundaries, highlighting trends that are interconnected but also potentially contradictory. And in empirical terms, these articles echo and refer to important developments in the object of study for audience researchers: media audiences and their various engagements with media texts and media platforms, a phenomenon that has also undergone crucial changes in the past decade.

As these articles go towards publication CEDAR is moving on to its second phase of work. Using trend-mapping exercises, consultations with stakeholders across its member countries and building scenarios to imagine future challenges for the field, the network will be undertaking what we know as the first foresight exercise in audience and reception studies to map a vision of the future for the field. Results from this second and final phase of work are anticipated at the end of 2017.

Acknowledgements:

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