Audience experiencing of emotions in the contemporary media landscape

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Abstract:
This short piece reflects on the mediated experiencing of emotions, based on a literature review of the field of audience research during 2005-15. We live in a complex and ubiquitous media environment which makes our experiencing of the world increasingly mediated, and audience studies have been part of this discussion. The main emergent themes identified in this field are emotions and identity formation; emotions and individual and collective memory; and mediated experiencing of negative emotions related to trauma and distant suffering. A transversal paradox was found: while interaction and participation seem more frequent and spontaneous experiencing of emotions appears to be possible, technological mediation introduces distance and detachment. This literature analysis shows the need for psycho-cognitive and cultural-critical approaches to the study of emotions to be reconciled in order to tackle the complexity of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Experiences, mediated emotions, memory; nostalgia, mediated witnessing, fandom.

Introduction

In the contemporary media-filled society, it is not only communication that is increasingly mediated; it is also the experiencing of emotions. The mediation of emotions is shaped by the technological evolution of the media that leads to a convergent, complex and synergic media landscape; and also by a paradigmatic change in the nature of audiences, who have become participative and creative, and who are taking a leading role in their use and

appropriation of the media. This short paper explores the paradoxical nature of the mediated experiencing of emotions: on the one hand, our constant interaction with the media results in a more frequent and spontaneous expression and triggering of emotions; on the other, technological mediation adds distance to the experiencing of emotions, sometimes resulting in detachment or indifference. We believe this discussion contributes to the wider debate about the concept of audiences itself and the contours of the audience research field.

Our method was the reviewing of literature that has been produced over the past decade in audience studies. As presented in the editorial of this special section (see Das and Ytre-Arne in this Themed Section), CEDAR was organised in main clusters that explored emerging directions in audience research. This paper is an output of the Audience Experiences Cluster, in which, among other themes, we critically spotted a significant amount of literature dealing with emotions and technological mediation, that is, addressing the cognitive and affective engagement with the media (e.g. Matthes, 2013) and also the emotional experiences (e.g. Bartsch, 2012) arising out of, and around, negotiations with and within the media. Methodologically, we identified emerging trends and themes in a body of literature selected around the keywords 'emotion', 'mediation' and 'experience'.

Emotion is a complex concept, theorized differently from one scientific field to another. The most classical approach comes from Psychology, conceptualizing emotions as mental processes that trigger behaviours (e.g. Scherer, 1986; Ekman and Davidson, 1994). Emotions are also addressed as a psychophysiological phenomenon by Cognitive Science and Neuroscience (e.g. Mandler, 1984; Damásio, 1994). The Social Sciences, in their turn, are more interested in the role that emotions play in social interaction. Sociology provides a wider approach focused on socialization, norms and practices (e.g. Durkheim, 2011 [1895], Turner and Stets, 2006), Anthropology explores the relationship between emotions and culture (e.g. Mauss, 2000 [1924]; Geertz, 1977), and Communication Sciences look more closely into the role played by emotions in human interaction (e.g. Goffman, 1959).

Within the literature of audience research in the past decade, emotions are understood as the experiencing of a feeling or state of affect. This experiencing results from contextual factors, such as mood, disposition, and technological mediation, and from more fixed individual aspects such as cognitive structures, temperament and personality. In the reviewed body of literature, the most common account of emotions is psychology-based (e.g. Bartsch *et al.*, 2008), but we also found a cultural-critical understanding of audiences and their emotional experiences. The experiencing of emotions is more frequently addressed as a 'reception' phenomenon, concerning the way people 'respond to', 'read' or 'understand' media content, and also the 'effects' of media on audiences. However, alternative perspectives can be found, usually dealing with this phenomenon as a cultural and social practice, considering the way media are incorporated and appropriated in everyday life (Moores, 2011).

In dealing with such broad categories as 'experiences' and 'emotions', we were able to spot sustained interested in related themes, such as memory, nostalgia, witnessing and

distant suffering through a thorough analysis of the other keywords included in the description of the articles that were tagged with 'emotion', 'mediation' and/or 'experience'. These themes are the ones forming the most coherent groupings in the literature we have explored, and also the best represented in terms of quantity of articles dealing with them, but they have nonetheless been unevenly addressed and explored in the literature, studying different types of audiences, media and genres, using diverse methodologies and coming from varied empirical locations. After the exploratory analysis of the literature based on the identification, counting and relating of keywords, we proceeded to a critical reading of the selected body of articles, which led us to the identification of thematic clusters related to experiencing emotions that are dealt with from both perspectives, and also concerning different types of audiences, media, genres and locations. The main emerging themes identified are: a) emotions and identity formation; b) emotions and individual and collective memory; and c) mediated experiencing of negative emotions related to trauma and distant suffering, which we present in sequence in this article.

However, a paradox stands out from the reviewing of this diverse body of work: on the one hand, the experiencing of emotions has become more frequent and intense, as media enable the instantaneous expression of emotions, and also the creation, sharing and revisiting of emotion-triggering content; on the other hand, technological mediation seems to add some distance or detachment to the experience of emotions, that become somehow less intense. In the literature, these perspectives are not confronted or discussed, they rather appear as assumptions underlying different perspectives and approaches. The intensification of emotion is more commonly assumed in the literature dealing with digital media and audiences evolving to 'prosumers', while the distance and detachment are usually findings of research addressing trauma, distant suffering and witnessing. However, there is a common linkage established between the changes in experiencing emotions and the changes in the contemporary media landscape – particularly digital media – and in audiences themselves. The affordances of digital media dynamically interact with audiences and their mediated experiences, thus culminating in a wider and underlying discussion of the audience research field: the complexification of audiences and the debate about the concept of audience itself.

Media emotions and identity formation

Broad trends in the literature show a strand of research on the emotions arising out of identity and the positioning of oneself as a subject in a mediatized world. Part of this research is rooted in research with youthful audiences, and the shaping of identity (Das, 2013) – emotions forming an integral part of this. Adolescence and the complexities it brings about have led to research around paradoxical teen identity discourses, as for instance perceptions of the body and the emotional experiencing of gender stereotyping in the media (Chu, 2014). A section of this research branches off into youthful negotiations of harmful, or less than desirable, interactions through and on the media (e.g. Weinstein and Selman, 2014 on digital stress) and another significant part focuses on celebrities, fandom,

role models and identity work (Duits and Vis, 2009), in relation to a diverse spread of media – from investigating emotional involvements in massively multiplayer video games or social worlds (e.g. Gabriels *et al.*, 2014; Pena and Hancock, 2006; Sánchez-Navarro & Aranda, 2013), readers' responses to fantasy (e.g. Olivier, 2008), to television (Aasebø, 2005) or to music (e.g. Nogic and Riley, 2007; Werner, 2009).

Another important and emergent group of research on these issues pays attention to children and young people in diasporic families and the role of media experiences in their particularly hybrid identity construction, whether it is second-generation girls of Turkish descent in Belgium and their performance of identities through the visualization of and reflection on their ideal television programme (Adriaens, 2013), Norwegian immigrant youth use of social networking sites (Mainsah, 2011) or infant refugees in Europe and media production (Leeuw and Rydin, 2007), teenage Muslim girls in London and New York (Noor, 2007), multi-ethnic London youth (Al-Ghaban, 2007) or African-descent children in Lisbon and their representation in the news (Marôpo, 2014) – or non-native Dutch girls and popular culture (Duits and Vis, 2009; Duits, 2010). The mediated experiencing of emotions by diasporic families is also connected to memory, both of personal experiences and of the collective memory of their home country and culture. This brings us to the next strand of research on audiences' experiences of emotion: on memory.

A third strand of research into emotions and audiencing leads us to the discovery of trauma as a theme that stands out in the literature. Trauma is discussed with regard to sensationalist, violent, reporting of human suffering and it relates closely also to audiences and their experience of witnessing distant suffering, which we will examine below. Commitment to humanitarian causes, the role of emotions in responding to crises or terror (Briones *et al.*, 2010; Shoshani and Slone, 2008), global compassion, receptivity to the experiences of those far away from us, and the multitude of emotions that arise at the interface of audiences and traumatic texts leads to a very rich strand of research (e.g. Kyriakidou, 2014a, 2014b; Ong, 2014, 2015; Höijer, 2004). Audiences' responses to televised violence seem to be an interesting emerging theme. This is separate from the general media violence debate which has, far too often, focused on the question of effects. The emotions arising in response to violence have been studied for instance by Uribe and Gunter (2007). Related to this is an interest in exploring the emotional experiences of audiences as shaped by genre – see Fortunati and Taipale's (2012) account of women's emotional experiences of mobile phones, Bonsu *et al.*'s, (2010) for an example of the role of emotions in reality television, Wood's (2010) investigation of emotions, commitment and empathy in dance reality shows or the numerous instances of emotions arising when watching films (Barker, 2005; Olivier, 2008) – including but not restricted to fantasy (e.g. *Lord of the Rings*), science fiction (*Jurassic Park*) or horror (e.g. Cherry, 2008).

A deeper look into these themes highlighted the dual nature of mediated emotions: the mediation can either result in intensification or mitigation of the emotions experienced. The experiencing of emotions in interconnection with memory and as a result of a sense of 'witnessing' mediated events and experiences stood out as striking examples of this

paradoxical duality of experiencing emotions through media.

The emotion(s) of creating, remembering and sharing memories

The emotions that stem from media use may be immediately caused by direct stimulation, but may also be connected to memory. Whether on a conscious or unconscious level, media experiences resonate with past situations, evoke nostalgia and bring back old feelings and perceptions. We identified two groups of literature here: one that relates memory and past feelings with the experience of media (mostly digital); and another that is connected with fan experiences evoking a previous life stage (also, mostly taking place in digital media).

Garde-Hansen (2011) offers an extensive overview on the relationship between memory and media in Media Studies, discussing the interdependencies between media technological affordances, media industry strategies, and users' practices related to capturing, creating, storing, retrieving and sharing memories. This overview encompasses all types of media, but digital media stand out in the case studies presented as triggers of profound changes in contemporary audiences, that have in fact become more than audiences in the traditional sense, as they were empowered by digital technologies to be more active, not only in choices and communication but also in content production and dissemination.

In fact, one significant strand of literature in the audience research field agrees that digital media – mainly the internet – have had a profound impact in the creation, sharing and revisiting of memories, and also in the practices of storing, archiving and sharing remembrances. The scope and depth of that impact is however discussed, with arguments ranging between the extremes of remediation – digital media reconfigure practices and phenomena that were already present in previous media, and radical change – digital media are the *locus* of innovative and creative use practices. The first perspective may be portrayed by the work of Garde-Hansen (2011), in which mobile phones are described as a modern take on photo albums. On the other hand, Keightley and Pickering (2014) further discuss the changes brought by digital technologies upon photo taking, viewing, storing and sharing, arguing that this cultural practice has radically changed. The transition from posed and rehearsed formal photographs to the instant selfies is the most striking example of this.

In both perspectives, several authors stress an increase in the creation and sharing of memories and relate it with an increase of frequency and intensity of emotions experienced. Vincent (2005) points out that mobile phones and social networking sites contribute to increasing the frequency of experiencing emotions by allowing permanent connectivity. In addition, emotions tend to be instantaneously shared, thus being experienced in a more intense fashion. Digital media enable permanent connectivity and are user-friendly, thus presumably satisfying better the human needs concerning social interaction and affectivity. Fleeting moments can now be easily captured and emotions instantly shared.

Another set of common practices is collecting and archiving digital content, particularly related with fan experiences. Lothian (2013) looks at fan fiction communities in

order to explore issues such as the value of such collections and archives, the selection and sharing criteria used, and the overall usefulness, legitimacy and meaning of such practices.

Barnes (2014) explores another aspect of fan fiction communities, the engagement of fans with websites and digital content in an affective way, problematizing existing concepts of 'produsage'. News sites, traditionally connected to a rational activity, are seen as capable of eliciting an emotional engagement as fan-like, the affect being 'the physical response to feelings' (Barnes 2014: 6) and helping the fan to 'negotiate the level of investment in that text' (*idem*). An 'affective practice' is thus seen at the start of the emotional connection and (inter)actions that the users undertake. In a similar line, Sandvoss discusses the media connection to politics in terms of an affective engagement similar to fandom, arguing that media convergence 'fosters the rise of affective attachments and engagement in political causes' (2012: 79).

At the same time, there is a growing body of literature that pays attention to 'disaffection' between subjects and media objects. Works around anti-fandom or non-fandom, dislike or displeasure (Zhou, 2013; see also Alters, 2007 and Theodoropoulou, 2007)[1] demonstrate how an antagonistic relationship can be as intense and meaningful as an affectively positive one.

The proliferation and dissemination of digital *souvenirs* contributes to a paradoxical take on the concept of memory itself. Memory tends to be associated with value, not only stemming from emotions and affections associated to it, but also from its uniqueness and exclusivity. There is always something special about a moment to remember. However, almost every moment can be digitally registered, turning digital *mementos* into trivial commonplaces. In addition, the easiness of creating, sharing and accessing memory is resulting in a decrease in our ability to remember facts, experiences and emotions. Hoskins (2011) presents a summary of the metaphors and present in the literature that discuss this phenomenon. Digitally mediated memory is a 'prosthetic' memory (Landsberg, 2004). Hoskins (2011) describes it as a 'careless' memory that is pervasive, accessible, disposable, distributed and promiscuous. On the other hand, Kuhn (2010) argues that digital content is multimedia and high quality, and revisiting digital memories creates immersive experiences and enables the re-enactment of the past.

Another paradox associated to digital memory is its simultaneous permanence and ephemerality. Anything published can be edited or deleted, but it can also be captured and shared, thus persisting in online circulation even after its deletion. For instance, Haskins (2007) observes that the internet is a vehicle for collection, preserving and displaying content about past news and events that feed collective memory, but argues that this collective archiving of content ultimately results in collective amnesia.

The practices and changes discussed up until now are individual, but there is also a relevant literature strand on collective memory and the ways in which contemporary media are changing its formation and sharing, and also its cultural and political dimensions. Bourdon and Kliger-Vilenchik (2011) demonstrate that, although TV content still reinforces the sense of belonging to a nation or culture, collective memory is becoming as fragmented

as TV channels and content themselves.[2]

Concerning digital media and collective media, Kuhn (2010) explores the interconnections between the private, public and personal spheres, focusing on collective activities, practices and performances. The notion of citizens being empowered by digital media to collaboratively build collective memory stands out in the literature (e.g. Gabel, 2013; Keightley and Schlesinger, 2014). By actively creating and sharing digital content, users are able to form bottom-up collective memories, some of them connected to civic action (e.g. Liew *et al.*, 2014). Digital media also contribute to a more connected way of forming collective memories, one that transcends territory and nation, one that is at the same time local and global – cosmopolitan memory (Levy and Sznaider, 2006; 2010) – and also a sign of emancipation (Bisht, 2013).

Nostalgia stands out as the theme where the inter-crossing of the individual and collective dimensions of mediated memory is more explored by researchers. The most common examples that deal with the association between memory and nostalgia for the past are the case of migrants who use the media to retrieve memories (e.g. Karanfil, 2009; Lohmeier and Pentzold, 2014); and the fandom around ageing celebrities, who use digital memories to feed their connection to such celebrities and even to reconfigure memories and identity (e.g. Rothenbuhler, 2007). Furthermore, fandom throughout life and nostalgia for previous stages of a person's life connected to digital *mementos* is an emergent focus of audience and fan studies (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Harrington and Bielby, 2010; Van den Bulck and Van Gorp, 2011), complementing an initial concentration on teen fandom, and a growing attention about adult fans (Bennett, 2006; Stevenson, 2009). These authors claim it is important to understand the complex interactions between biography, autobiography (in the sense of individual's storying of life) and media texts (Harrington and Bielby, 2010: 444) while paying attention to the role of media objects as 'emotional anchors' (*idem*: 445) throughout life.[3]

The academic literature on audience research from the past ten years dealing with audiences' emotions converges into the notion of complexification of audiences. This means that the concept of 'audience' itself is being discussed, in some case replaced by others such as 'prosumer' and 'produser' (see Pavlikova and Kleut in this Themed Section), and in other cases rethought and reconfigured. This complexification is often understood as an increase in activity, choice, interaction and 'liveness' or 'realness' of digitally mediated experiences. Memories are one of the most important triggers of such 'richer' mediated experiences, raising emotions and the willingness to share them with others. However, there is also a reported sense of 'saturation' of digital *mementos*, where the increase in content production and sharing, rather than triggering intensified emotions, results in indifference or 'numbed' emotions.

Witnessing, or experiencing emotions at a distance

The notions of 'saturation' and 'numbness' are also present in another emergent theme in the literature about the mediated experiencing of emotions, which is witnessing, that is, the

sense of 'live' experiencing media content. Rowe (2014) attributes the intensification of this witnessing experience to the high quality and big dimension of screens, to the increase of diversity of screen-based content, and also to the interactivity afforded by digital media. In the case of television, high density, 3D, curved screens and internet connection are technological developments that reinforce this phenomenon.

Another facet of witnessing is the impulse to register relevant events and observations, and also share those that are considered noteworthy. One example of such practices is citizen journalism, but they can generally be described as 'mediated witnessing'. Digital devices enable the creation and sharing of such events and experiences (through print screens, photos, videos, etc.). Andén-Papadopoulos (2013), referring specifically to citizen journalism, is one who discusses the impact and effects of the 'enhanced' reception in the experience. She admits that such practices can have an impact in agenda-setting and even contribute to the formation of alternative agendas, but argues that professional news and direct witnessing both have stronger impact in audiences. The author also argues that digital mediation adds a 'distance' to the way events are perceived, experienced and even turn into memories, as they are made accessible to wider audiences.

Research on the specific issue of 'distant suffering' reports mixed results, stating that digital mediation causes both higher indifference regarding suffering, and also greater proximity. These contradictions depend on the source and media format (e.g. Ong, 2014; Scott, 2014). Kyriakidou (2014a, 2014b) emphasizes the role of culture and moral values in the negotiation of perception and decoding of technologically mediated distant suffering. The author proceeds to suggest a theoretical framework for the analysis and understanding of technologically mediated reception and perception of distant suffering based on the concept of 'media witnessing'. Ong (2015), studying the Philippines' context, finds that geographical distance to tragedy is crucial to determining emotional reactions of the audiences (sympathy *versus* indifference and even denial). However, the author also highlights the subjects' moralities as another determinant factor: middle-class morality usually resulted in denial of the suffering witnessed *via* media while low-income groups experienced intensified emotions though identification with personal experiences and appropriated media narratives as resources to cope with their own suffering. Kyriakidou (2014b) adds another layer of meaning and experience to this phenomenon by observing that the remembrance of 'mediated witnessing' allows audiences to 'reconstruct' the media narratives.

Conclusion

This extensive overview at the literature on audiences' experiences and emotions over the past decade, with a closer look at memory and distant suffering, allowed us to identify two apparently contradictory trends: on the one hand, the contemporary media landscape, in particular interactivity and audience participation, contributes to the intensification of the experiencing of emotions; on the other hand, it also mitigates emotions by introducing some distance between the witnessing and reality, and thus cause indifference, denial, and

even rejection. In addition, the proliferation of digital content, greatly due to the action of 'prosumers' and 'produsers', also contributes to both intensification and mitigation of emotions.

Another take on this phenomenon would be considering the media as 'magnifiers' of both positive and negative emotional reactions. In this sense, the empowerment of users, the information overload, and the 'distance' inherent to technological mediation contribute to intensify memories and nostalgia, connectivity with others, engagement with content, and also sympathy towards distant suffering, depending on what each individual would experience in an unmediated situation, but may also result in 'saturation', 'numbness' and indifference.

The complexification of the concept of emotions brought about by digital media and transmedia and of what it means to experience emotions in a mediated way are closely related to an underlying debate in the field of audience research, which is the questioning and redefining of the notion of 'audience' itself.

Moreover, this group of literature also shows how psycho-cognitive and cultural-critical approaches to the study of emotions need to be reconciled to tackle the complexity of the phenomenon and to address the paradox explored in this short article. In addition, a closer look at the intertwining between the conceptualization of 'emotion' and 'experience' and the theoretical perspectives on media and mediation would allow to further discuss the linkages and contradictions between them.[4]

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Notes:

[1] This type of audience was also particularly found under Invisible Audiences cluster in CEDAR – see Kaun, Hartley and Juzefovics in this issue.

[2] Although the most recent literature tends to focus on digital media, broadcasting media (mainly television) still play an important role in building and reinforcing collective memory (e.g. Wolfgram, 2006; Bor, 2010; Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2011). Also, Van Dijck (2006) addresses the importance of popular music in the formation of collective memory. Concerning television, the role that Public Service plays in reinforcing the connection between collective memory and the nation-State is highlighted by Juzefovičs (2013). Ashuri (2007) studied other strategies used by the media

industry – television in particular – to artificially build and reinforce certain aspects of collective memory. The role of journalists and journalistic routines is also considered (Zandberg, 2010; Zandberg, Meyers and Neiger, 2012).

[3] Monaco (2010), as well as Harrington *et al.* (2011) reflect on how this relationship is also important among fan scholars, notably Jenkins (2006).

[4] About this, see the discussion around the concept of connective action by Bennet and Sederberg (2012), or the discussion of the concept of mediatization of society by Hajvard (2008).