

## **Media audience practices beyond living memory: Modeling theoretical and methodological issues**

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### **Abstract:**

While research on media audience history is fast advancing, its temporal boundaries are mainly limited to what can be culled from people still alive. This article pushes these boundaries back in time by asking, how we may capture media audience practices of the distant past, that is beyond living memory, and what are the methodological challenges of such endeavours. It is argued that an extension of the empirical perspective on past media audience practices requires a widening of theoretical frameworks and a deepening of methodological approaches. So, the article provides a conceptual overview of key theoretical traditions that may inform studies on distant media audience practices, notably theories of historical reception, cultural history and histories of visual anthropology. Then a three-dimensional methodology model is proposed that is structured according to analytical perspectives and divided according to dimensions of the analytical process. The relevance of the model is documented by drawing on existing studies and key methodological challenges are discussed.

**Keywords:** media audience history, history of reading, theories of historical reception, cultural history, visual anthropology, qualitative methodology.

A steady stream of historical research on media audiences is fast disproving Sabina Mihelj's and Jérôme Bourdon's statement that 'historical research on media audiences is still in its infancy' (Mihelj & Bourdon, 2015, p. 3). Today, we have diversified insights on how people in the past went to the cinema, used the telephone, listened to the radio, watched television and read newspapers – and how these practices were perceived and understood by society at large. This growing body of research helps widen the scale and scope of

existing media histories that still mostly take an institutional or a technological approach (Chapman, 2005; Høyer & Pöttker, 2005; Kittler 1986/1999). It also helps balance the focus of existing media audience and reception studies that are chiefly concerned with analyzing current media audience practices (see overviews in Alasuutari, 1999; Nightingale, 2011; Schrøder, 2018). Historical media audience and reception studies are important because they serve to nuance and deepen the empirical field of media and communication studies. But these studies are also important because they serve to advance the theoretical reflexivity of our field, avoiding what the North-American historian Lynn Hunt has termed 'presentism', by which she means 'interpreting the past in terms of present concerns', a stance that may easily lead to 'moral complacency and self-congratulation' (Hunt, 2002, n.p.).

Yet, despite these advances important gaps remain in the literature on ordinary people's media practices in the distant past. By distant past I mean a time that we cannot study by generating data based on methodologies eliciting meaning-making practices of people still alive, such as surveys, interviews, diaries, or observations. So, this article asks: How may we capture media audience practices of the distant past, and what are the methodological challenges of such endeavours? In line with critical, interpretive approaches to current media audience studies (e.g. Couldry, 2004; Couldry & Hepp, 2016), historical media audience practices are understood as contextualized and historically situated processes of meaning-making, or 'audiencing' (Fiske, 1994), when people engage with one or more media. Audiences' meaning-making practices are specific forms of social activity where media engagement forms a core or corollary of everyday interaction. Since meaning-making is a dynamic, interpretive process, interpretive research strategies are also prevalent. Whether focus is on current or historical audiencing, particular media objects (or texts) and people's particular and socially embedded modes of meaning-making are interlocking aspects of critical media audience studies. Moreover, interpretive media audience studies share an application of direct evidence of meaning-making (such as diaries, letters, oral testimonies, observation) and indirect evidence (such as library lendings, ticket sales, reviews, public debates).

Based on a brief overview of trends in existing media audience history research, the article outlines key theoretical traditions that may inform studies on distant media audience practices, notably histories of reading and histories of visual anthropology. It then proposes and discusses a three-dimensional methodology model. It is structured according to which analytical perspectives the researcher addresses (macro, meso or micro perspectives), and it is divided according to dimensions of the analytical process (generating data, analyzing data, communicating results). In conclusion, implications are drawn on widening the historical perspective on media audiences in view of Lynn Hunt's assertion that presentism also involves the risk of 'short-term history' (Hunt, 2002, n.p.) obliterating uncomfortable differences, yet at the same time occluding commonalities of interest and concerns. Studying media audiences of the distant past, it is argued, can help address both types of risk, thus ultimately advancing scholarly reflexivity and public understanding.

## **Existing media audience historiography**

Current scholarship on media audience history is thriving as is evidenced by special issues or sections published in recent years (Egan, Smith & Terrill, 2019; Mihelj & Bourdon, 2015) and by mounting participation in history sections at international conferences such as ICA, IAMCR and ECREA. The interest chiefly centres around film audiences and, to a lesser extent, audiences formed around radio, television and print media. While covering a variety of geographical areas and widening groups of audience members, what these studies have in common is an empirical focus on the recent past where audiences' memories of meaning-making practices can be captured through, for example, interviews, observation over time, or diaries. Many studies draw on a critical oral-history tradition which flourishes from the 1970s on and is based on ideals of 'history from below' offering underserved people a voice as a lever of social empowerment. As such, this line of studies shares epistemological and methodological ground with critical research on current media audiencing.

Epistemologically, because both entertain a knowledge interest in how socio-cultural power plays out on a day-to-day basis. Methodologically, because both apply time-based means of research that uncover meaning-making processes after the event, for example by interviewing people about their media practices; or which analyse data about media practices as they have unfolded.

The epistemological and methodological approaches to media audience history imply that very little is known of actual media audiences' processes of meaning-making, interpretation and reflection beyond living memory. This poses a problem because audiences' interactions with silent film, early photography, not to speak of the vast and varied body of print media, played out under very different conditions, the most important of which may be that media output was a scarce commodity, relative to the overflow of mediated information seen from the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Moreover, the reception of print media demands at least a bit of literacy unlike the immediate reception of audio-visual media. So, vital aspects of audiencing in the past are still taken for granted rather than being explored. Ways forward, I claim, is to harness theoretical approaches that may help advance a more comprehensive and integrative media audience historiography and, in tandem, specify methodological challenges involved in empirical studies of audiencing in the distant past. Key among these approaches are literary reception theories, cultural histories of reading and histories of visual anthropology.

## **Literary reception theories**

In a long history of media audiencing, people's uses of print media are vital, and theories of reading offer key theoretical resources for analyzing these uses. The theories grow out of literary reception studies and new cultural history, respectively. In the field of literary reception studies, research on actual reading practices in the past is shaped in critical opposition to strands of theorizing inferring 'the act of reading' from the literary text itself. For example, rhetorical criticism defines the inferred reader as 'intended' (Booth, 1961)

‘and ‘hypothetical’ (Fish, 1967), structuralist criticism speaks of the ‘ideal’ reader (Genette, 1972; Bakhtin, 1986) while phenomenological criticism is concerned to locate the ‘implied’ reader in the text (Iser, 1974). In contrast, theories of historical reception are interested in how actual readers in the past appropriate texts as situated and contextualized meaning-making practices. German Hans-Robert Jauss is a key figure in this strand of research, particularly because he conceptualises readers’ ‘horizon of expectations’ to a given text as emanating from ‘previous understandings of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the contrast between poetical and practical language’ (Jauss, 1970, p. 11).

Jauss’ historical reception theory offers an important approach to media audience historiography, because it stresses reading as a changing, yet socially situated, interaction between particular textual modes of expression and particular groups of readers. Studying readers’ horizon of expectations invites an attention to aesthetic norms and socio-cultural routines as important catalysts of genre transformations, since readers may accept, reject or reflect on their reading matter. In that sense, Jauss’ approach resonates with Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model which has proved a foundational text in studies of current audiences with its focus on structural diversities of audiencing. Furthermore, subsequent critique of Jauss’ theory of historical reception has addressed issues similar to the questions raised in studies on current audiences: should analysis of media texts be an integral part of a sound study of media audiencing? If so, how is such an integration handled? Conversely, should ‘the everyday texture of modern society’ (Ang, 1991, p. 166) be the basis of judging analytical relevance? Or, more radically do we need ‘a non-media centric’ approach to media studies (Morley, 2008) where inequities of power as they are inscribed and enacted in people’s everyday lives form the focus of scholarly attention? The few media historians who have addressed these questions in a systematic fashion provide different answers. For example, Susan Douglas advocates that ‘we can begin to retrieve audience responses to past media through the texts themselves, as long as we also triangulate this work with the broader historical context of the period under study and whatever shards of audience response exist’ (Douglas, 2008, p. 69). Conversely, Jonathan Rose totally dismisses any analysis of media texts: ‘a large body of recent literary criticism, based as it is on the receptive fallacy, should be scrapped’ (Rose, 1995, p. 209). But, unlike Jauss and colleagues, none of these authors offer any theoretical argument for their conclusions.

Still, it should be noted that while interested in studying actual reading practices in the past, Jauss still follows traditional literary scholarship by focusing on book fiction and identifying changes in print culture as results of particular works of art breaking familiar horizons of expectations (for critical overviews, see Drotner, 1985/1988; Sandvoss, 2011). This focus clearly poses problems for media scholars. They will often be attuned to analyzing serialised and ephemeral output such as newspapers, magazines, advertisements and pamphlets; and much of this output goes well beyond the fictional genres favoured by theories of historical reception. As I have argued elsewhere, media audience historiography needs to expand and revise the literary theories of historical reception in terms of the

contexts of production, the diversity of media and audience groups. This is because theories such as Jauss' rest on:

an unacknowledged notion of the text as existing within a dynamic market economy (hence the modernist possibility of breaking with convention), yet with an author unhampered by economic restrictions: his noble literary message never seems to be polluted by mean financial considerations, and hack writers are beyond the pale of theoretical reflection. Equally, the reader is an ideal adult male with ample time for contemplative immersion in the intricacies of the text. Clearly, one who shares such covert assumptions cannot fully explain the sudden absorption felt by a newly-literate ten-year-old girl reading the latest installment of a comic or a magazine between her lessons or home chores (Drotner, 1985/1988, pp. 9-10).

Inspiration to this shifting focus towards more complex conceptions of production, text and audience relations may be found in cultural histories of reading.

### **Cultural histories of reading**

Historians' interest in reading practices in the past grows out of critical expansions of book history. As part of the so-called 'new cultural history' of the 1970s and 1980s (Burke, 2004), historians' interest in material aspects of book production and circulation widen to include all forms of print material (in principle at least) and their changing modes of reception and use. Naturally, reception of print media means practices of reading. A key figure in developing a cultural history of reading is Robert Darnton. Trained as a historian of 18<sup>th</sup> century France, he studies changes in symbolic modes of communication, including the reception of tracts, pamphlets, chapbooks and magazines, and their impact on social transformations. He defines the book 'as a means of communication' and proposes to study it as a 'communications circuit' of production, distribution and reception. The reader is seen to complete the circuit 'because he [sic] influences the author both before and after the act of composition' (Darnton, 1982, p. 67). Applying case-based analysis rather than statistical evidence of changing literacy rates, Darnton stresses the meaning-making properties and the variability of reading practices within and across different time frames: 'Men and women have read in order to save their souls, to improve their manners, to repair their machinery, to seduce their sweethearts, to learn about current events, and simply to have fun' (Darnton, 1986, p. 12). In coming to terms with such deciphering processes, researchers should take note of the fact that 'texts shape the response of readers, however active they may be' (Darnton, 1982, p. 79). While such a call is in line with the propositions made by literary historians of reception such as Jauss, in practice most cultural historians of reading have been more interested in readers' practices and the circumstances of reading than in the meaning-making of actual reading processes.

Initially, historians of reading are concerned with establishing long-term transformations of reading practices. An issue of considerable debate is whether or not a 'reading revolution' can be detected in late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe (Wittman, 1999): does reading go from being an intensive to an extensive practice because of increased access to reading matter and growing literacy rates? With mounting empirical evidence and an emerging de-colonising of research, scholarly interest in such overarching claims are gradually abandoned for more in-depth analyses. By the same token, efforts have increased to delineate 'the active reader', as indicated by Darnton's quote ('however active they may be') and to discuss the structural limits of literacy power in the past. This interest clearly resonates with intense debates in 1990s as they play out in studies on current audiences (e.g. Ang, 1991; Hermes, 1995; Morley, 1993). On a wider canvas, such debates illuminate, and feed into, neo-Marxist theorisings on the complicated and intersecting hierarchies of societal structure and agency (Giddens, 1984). With their time-based and interpretive approaches, cultural histories of reading offer historical depth and conceptual finesse to research on current audiences as well as to more foundational issues.

As should be evident, literary reception theories and cultural histories of reading are important resources for studies of distant and elusive audiencing, because they share a theoretical interest in time-based studies of readers' meaning-making practices as dynamic, interpretive processes along a continuum of text-reader relations, and because they offer important conceptual approaches for empirical study of such relations. But as is also clear, literary scholars tend to focus on the textual aspects of representation, while historians are keener on discovering readers' practices of interpretation. Both tend to single out particular types of media as objects of study, be it specific newspapers, magazines or religious pamphlets. In trying to resolve that conundrum, audience historiography may usefully look towards the answers offered in studies of current audiencing. Janice Radway, a pioneer in this line of research with her study of women's reading of popular fiction, neatly pinpoints the text-context challenge:

No matter how extensive the effort to dissolve the boundaries of the textual object or the audience, most recent studies of reception, including my own, continue to begin with the 'factual' existence of a particular kind of text which is understood to be received by some set of individuals (Radway, 1988, p. 363).

As a way of 'dissolving the boundaries' of fixed entities, Radway proposes 'a new object of analysis' which she defines as 'the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it' (Radway, 1988, p. 366). This proposal is taken up in Ang's and Morley's calls for more holistic approaches to study everyday media practices, noted above. Importantly, by adopting such approaches time-based studies on media audiences can help illuminate that co-evolution of audiences and 'media ecologies' (Ito et al., 2010) or 'media manifold' (Couldry, 2011) are not

phenomena born with networked, digital cultures. The history of visual anthropology can further deepen that insight.

### **History of visual anthropology**

Since the early days of anthropology, researchers have applied photography, and later phonographs, film, and video, as part of their studies. From the 1950s on, these scholarly applications of media beyond writing and print are lumped together under the label 'visual anthropology' to denote two rather different strands of research: 'on the one hand, the visual anthropology that studies visible cultural forms. On the other is the visual anthropology that uses the visual media to describe and analyse culture' (MacDougall, 1997, p. 283). So, anthropologists use media as objects of study in a manner similar to interpretive media and communication research, uncovering how particular groups or communities shape, share and receive everything from family postcards to televangelism (Askew & Wilk, 2002; Rothenbuhler & Coman, 2005). In tandem, anthropologists use media as methodological means of data collection and analysis when studying whole cultures and communities to complement their standard tools of written field notes (Pink, 2007). Moreover, non-academic filmmakers have a long and contentious tradition of communicating the cultures of exotic others to publics in the global north.

In the 2000s, some anthropologists have argued for 'anthropology of visual communication' as an umbrella term embracing the two strands and denoting more processual enquiries 'into all that humans make for others to see' (Ruby, 2005, p. 165). Others claim that an inclusive anthropology of visible cultural forms as both means and ends of study invites more reflexive and participatory research approaches than written forms thereby generating 'a transformative potential for modern thought, culture and society, self-identity and memory and social science itself' (Pink, 2007, p. 17). Part of these reflexive deliberations involve revisiting historical film footage and other visual material in attempts to reassess realist notions of visual observation, representation and knowledge formation (Edwards, 2001). These efforts suggest ways of analysis that are very relevant to studies of distant audiences. For example, in an overview of how visual anthropology has engaged with media audience studies, Stephen Hughes notes that 'audiences and their imagined modes of viewing are already part of the filmmaking process' in early ethnographic films (Hughes, 2011, p. 294). So, he urges scholars to pay attention to contextualized modes of address in studying these early materials and distinguish between inscribed and actual audiences.

### **A holistic model for studying distant audience practices**

Taken together, literary reception theories, cultural histories of reading and histories of visual anthropology offer strong theoretical foundations for studying distant audiences' meaning-making practices. The focus on print media helps illuminate a longer perspective on communications media than is found in most empirical studies of past audience

practices, and the focus on visual modes of audience representation and performance mobilises sources of analysis not usually explored in audience histories. Yet, literary reception theories, cultural histories of reading and histories of visual anthropology rarely specify their methodological approaches and the challenges involved. Literary reception theories and cultural histories of reading come out of arts and humanities scholarship where methodological considerations rarely venture beyond general hermeneutic strategies of interpretation. Visual anthropology follows the methodological tradition of anthropology at large in specifying holistic and ‘thick’ description of entire cultures through long-term immersion in natural environments. So, for example criteria of data selection, levels of analysis and multi-method approaches are issues that seem less relevant than is the case in other social-science disciplines.

Yet, methodological specificity and reflexivity are key if studies of distant media audiences’ meaning-making practices are to proceed with empirical quality and depth. Since meaning-making is essentially an interpretive process, qualitative methodologies are essential tools to grasp these processes: they are interpretive through the entire research process, from data generation to communication of results, and they can provide nuanced answers to how particular audiences articulate meaning the way they do, and why particular media expressions make sense to them the way they do. The following model is meant as a heuristic device to further that process. It focuses on qualitative approaches and it follows Jerome Bourdon (2014, p. 2) in stressing that ‘methodological difficulties are ultimately tied to questions of conceptualization’. Methodology is, indeed, more than a technical matter of practical procedures, since it always involves (normative) considerations of theoretical perspective, limitations of analytical reach and epistemological reflections on knowledge interests. Still, the model below also deviates from Bourdon’s methodological typology which focuses on four empirical source categories when studying past media audiences (Bourdon, 2014, p. 1):

from above (coming from media, political, administrative elites), from the side (references to audiences in other media, including art and literature), from below (written and more recently oral expressions of audience members) and from the media themselves (both physical artefacts and media messages).

A typology of source categories offers a useful means of specifying origin and position of sources: who speaks about what to whom in which context. But a typology of sources is only a partial methodological model, since it fails to include key considerations about analytical perspectives and analytical dimensions. After all, sources may operate within and across different analytical perspectives with rather different research results. For example, film reviews may inform a study of professional film reception as a ‘source from above’, but they may also be part of laying out cinemagoers’ horizon of expectations and so be defined as a ‘source from below’.



We need to be mindful of at least three analytical perspectives within which particular audience data are located and interpreted: macro, meso and micro perspectives. Macro-perspectives are often seen in media histories of long-term audience transformations (Butsch, 2000; Drotner, 1985/1988); meso-perspectives invite more short-term developments of audience engagements with particular media and in specific locations (Pawley, 2001; Pearson, 1999); while micro-perspectives tend to focus on the practices and assessments of specific audience groups in relation to particular genres, times and locations (Baggeman, 1997; Umble, 2003; Warren, 2000). Moreover, a holistic methodological model needs to include the various dimensions of the research ecology: generating data, analyzing data and communicating results. This inclusion is important because each of these dimensions catalyses specific methodological issues in relation to time-based meaning-making. For example, a key issue when generating data about long-term audience transformations are the often massive amounts of print media available: so which data should be selected, on what grounds and for which purposes?

Bourdon’s typology of sources indicates an additional methodological issue which needs to be addressed explicitly, namely whether data represent direct or indirect meaning-making practices: do the data originate with audiences themselves or with others speaking about or on behalf of audiences? This distinction is important since it touches on analytical validity and contexts of interpretation.

So, studies of distant media audiencing, I would argue, need to be based on a holistic methodological model based on qualitative approaches and where analytical perspectives and analytical dimensions are key, rather than merely source categories. Applying such a model highlights particular methodological issues, some of which resonate with, and have been discussed by, scholars of current media audience studies. Still, these issues need to be handled with a view to the specific time-space challenges of the distant past; and so the following section describes and discusses how scholars of distant media audiencing have responded to these challenges (see **Figure 1**). While the examples are by no means meant to be exhaustive or complete, they may solidify reflective methodological ground for future researchers.

**Figure 1:** A holistic, methodological model of distant audiencing

Analytical perspective	Analytical dimension		
	<i>Generating data (what)</i>	<i>Analysing data (how)</i>	<i>Communicating data (who)</i>
Macro perspective			
Meso perspective			
Micro perspective			
<b>Analytical issue</b>	<i>Direct data/indirect data</i>	<i>Text/context focus</i>	<i>Voice</i>

## **Generating data**

### ***Direct evidence***

As in other types of interpretive media audience research, generating data about distant audiences' meaning-making is a matter of direct as well as indirect evidence. Direct evidence involves two types of data: media artefacts and audience voices. Media artefacts are particular modes of media expressions (e.g. photography, film, print) or ensembles of media expressions defined according to particular criteria of selection (e.g. genre, period, location). Direct evidence in the form of audiences' own voices includes, for example, biographies, diaries and letters, marginalia and compilations. Marginalia are particularly important when researching distant child audiences. In his study of British child readers of the long 18<sup>th</sup> century, Matthew Grenby notes that 'for children, who leave so few reliable records of their experiences, marginalia are a hugely useful source. Apart from anything else they have left so much of it' (Grenby, 2011, p. 25). Marginalia include 'drawings, colouring-in, pen trials, ownership inscriptions, inserted passages of text and, in rare cases, whole added sections' (Grenby, 2011, p. 26. See also Jackson, 2001). Marginalia are material imprints of ownership and indicate that juvenile audiences re-read whatever came to hand many times over. Since marginalia are more copious in school books than in thrilling penny dreadfuls, they also point to differences in children's reading strategies and responses.

Compilations offer another example of direct evidence. These are extracts of reading matter that indicate audience practices when media are a scarce commodity. For example, commonplace books were popular in 18<sup>th</sup>- and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain. These are blank books into which individual or groups of readers transcribe sections or quotes from their reading material adding their comments, reflections and sometimes parodies. The books 'reveal the internalization of dominant genres and modes of feeling which may help us to assess the appeal of certain contemporary texts' (Colclough, 1998, p. 14). The compilations are selective marks of past reading activities often used for public display and dialogue, and they indicate contexts of media use not easily illuminated elsewhere.

How direct evidence is selected and the criteria of their choice very much depend on empirical research designs; and, as noted, research traditions differ in this respect. Some, such as literary reception theory, involve text-cum-audience data selection and analysis while others focus solely on audience members' interpretive processes as contextualized practices. An under-studied aspect of the text-cum-audience research concerns what could be called 'the five-year syndrome' in selecting media texts for study. One is faced with a deluge of material, and only scholars with a cursory experience of archives would contend that this is a challenge of a digital culture only. For example, in my own study of popular children's magazines in England since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Drotner, 1985/1988), magazine titles numbered several hundred and many came out on a weekly basis. What should be one's criteria of selection in a situation like this? At the time of study, existing research was scarce and kept to institutional approaches. Here, selection was based on a mixture of publication

length, high circulation figures and genre innovation, yet without making criteria of selection explicit. My own choice was to take five-year leaps for each title in order to get a handle on textual and material transformations. Naturally, this choice leaves much to be desired as a basis of my ensuing in-depth analyses, since narrative and visual changes all too easily fall under the radar of such a scanning process. Digitization of popular print media may ease the initial phases of data selection, but so far machine-learning and similar digital tools do not supplant researcher-based choices for depth analysis.

### ***Indirect evidence***

Indirect evidence encompasses a wide range of data that speaks tacitly or circumstantially about audiences' meaning-making processes. This type of evidence comes from communities beyond audiences themselves and represents qualitative as well as quantitative data. Qualitative data include professional reviews, guide books and reports about proper media behaviour in addition to visual material such as illustrations, posters or paintings (Stewart, 2006). Quantitative data encompass statistics on, for example, circulation figures and box-office revenues (Altick, 1957/1967; Hansen, 1991) as well as industry reports on audience testimonies (Sullivan, 2010).

Print dominates the media cultures of the distant past, and print takes many shapes and forms and is taken up by diverse audience groups. So, indirect evidence about reading practices are intimately bound up with normative discourses about the relations between media and audiences rather than with actual audience practices. As Richard Butsch notes, 'categories like 'the audience' are socially constructed, their attributes typically described in terms of dichotomies' (Butsch, 2000, p. 2). As for media, Joli Jensen terms these binaries the discourse of optimism and the discourse of pessimism, respectively (Jensen, 1990). For example, in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe religious and openly didactic non-fiction is mostly deemed good for readers while fiction, notably in serialised form, is considered bad. When a new medium is widely taken up, these binaries may develop into media panics (Drotner, 1992). Here, the new medium becomes an object of intense public and emotionally very charged debate while existing media are simultaneously means of orchestrating the debate. Media panics illuminate the normative ramifications of media audiencing. Yet, on a wider canvas, the panics also catalyse wider societal debates about gendered, classed and age-bound power regimes and fears of their disruption. So, contextual sensitivity is as essential when generating indirect data as is the case when generating and selecting direct data.

### ***Analytical perspectives***

Most studies of distant audiences adopt a research design blending direct and indirect data. The relative analytical importance of these types of data largely depends on the overall analytical perspective taken in a given empirical study. For direct and indirect data speak to different aspects of audiencing. Direct data invite analysis of articulated audience practices, while indirect data mobilise an attention to the discourses contextualising these practices.

As noted, *macro perspectives* on distant audience practices often focus on long-term audience transformations, and empirical studies tend to focus on discourses about audiences based on indirect data rather than on actual audience practices based on direct data (Butsch, 2000; Engelsing, 1974; Staiger, 1992. But see Drotner, 1985/1988, and Colclough, 2007, for a practice-based macro-perspective). Such a focus is understandable given the often extended time-spans of investigation, the enormous bulk of media material coupled with the paucity and selective character of direct evidence of actual audience practices. Cultural historians' dismantling of an assumed reading revolution in late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe is a good indication that evidence of reading practices based on direct evidence from readers themselves is a difficult task to perform across large time spans – the evidence is simply too scant to validate a conclusion that, in tandem with wider access to more print media, reading went from being an intensive preoccupation to a dispersed form of entertainment (Colclough, 1998; Grenby, 2011).

*Meso perspectives* on distant audience practices often apply shorter time-spans and pay attention to more localized spaces and genres than is the case with studies adopting a macro perspective. This approach lends itself to specific research questions that serve to guide the researcher's choice of data, and so studies often generate a mixture of indirect and direct data for further analysis. Much pioneering work on early film audiences follow that path (Haller, 2012; Jernud, 2012; Stokes & Maltby, 1999; Sullivan, 2010) in addition to depth studies of reading and readers (Klancher, 1987; Pawley, 2001; Pearson, 1999).

*Micro perspectives* on distant audience practices invite more depth of analytical focus in terms of media genres, types of audience, time and location. Such depth almost inevitably comes at a cost of breadth of empirical scope; but what is gained are more options to generate direct data relative to indirect data. Micro perspectives therefore offer more options than macro and meso perspectives to advance empirical validity of actual audiencing, not only in terms of 'thick description', but equally in terms of intertextual and contextual complexity of analysis (Baggeman, 1997; Vincent, 1982). Studies indicate that adopting a micro perspective in empirical terms need not preclude an analytical attention to issues of power or politics often associated with macro or meso perspectives.

In sum, generating data when studying distant audiences involves choices of analytical perspective, choices that are ultimately dependent on the research questions at hand. Whatever choice is made, different analytical perspectives lend themselves to selecting various mixtures of direct and indirect data about audience practices and they enforce methodological challenges to do with the validity and reach of results (see **Figure 2**). Studies demonstrate that analytical perspective does not equal conceptual perspective. For example, a micro perspective on distant audiences does not necessarily mean focusing on individual audience members, nor does it preclude addressing wider structural issues. Thus, studies of distant audiences add both empirical and conceptual evidence to discussions in the 1990s and 2000s on the critical edge of audience studies. In a notable article, John Corner described audience studies on the wrong side of what he termed the 'public knowledge project' and the 'popular culture project' when he bemoaned that 'certain

versions of the reception perspective' amounted to 'a form of sociological quietism, or loss of critical energy, in which increasing emphasis on the micro-processes of viewing-relations displaces (though rarely explicitly so) an engagement with the macro-structures of media and society' (Corner 1991, p. 269). Such conceptual binaries have proved unfounded, and sound empirical analytical procedures are important aides in that documentation.

## **Analysing data**

### ***Text and context***

The co-evolution of media ecologies and audience engagements implies that scholars face important analytical choices on how to balance media aspects and people aspects, or text and context aspects, when studying audiences' meaning-making practices. As noted above, studies on current audiences differ in handling that balancing act depending on theoretical tradition, the research questions posed and, ultimately, individual scholars' knowledge interests. An arts and humanities-background readily invites an attention to media, or textual, aspects of interpretation, while a social-science background trains scholars in analyzing people, or contextual, aspects of interpretation. Both traditions are concerned with meaning-making as a dynamic and situated practice; and so scholars, irrespective of tradition, face the challenges noted above: does one put people/social context or media/text first in the analytical process? And what is the relative, analytical weight of the two aspects? In principle, many scholars may wish to respond that both aspects are co-dependent and therefore should be accorded equal analytical importance. But in practice, this is rarely the case.

While all audience studies share these choices of balancing text and context aspects, scholars of distant audiencing face an added analytical option and obstacle: distant audiences' meaning-making often means interpretation of written text. This fact adds analytical attention to the notion of 'reading' as an analytical term. Scholars studying current audience practices may apply the term as a loose analytical category meaning interpreting the data at hand, even if these data focus on the social contexts of meaning-making and includes little or nothing about the media texts involved. But analyzing the practices of literally reading print media invites the scholar to pay close analytical attention to the actual media texts and their affordances in the process of audience interpretation. As noted, media historiography could do well to incorporate the insights provided by literary reception theory, particularly Jauss' notion of horizon of expectation, while critically engaging with his modernist limitations in terms of popular literature. This incorporation is important because reception theory is concerned with *how* meaning is generated at the interplay of actual media texts and different groups of readers. While cultural historians, including historians of the book, have made important contributions to which print media and genres have evolved and who have been their readers, literary scholarship adds

important formal aspects of analysis that help provide a holistic analytical approach to mediated meaning-making as a socially situated practice.

Yet, while scholars of distant audiencing may help advance audience studies at large by a closer scrutiny of reading, they also face particular obstacles. This is because they have so limited power over their potential data: they can generate data for their study only on the basis of existing material in archives, libraries, collections and other holdings. This situation has key implications for their choice of analytical dimensions and the relative weight of textual and contextual elements.

### ***Macro analysis***

As noted, the quantitative mismatch between loads of media material and scarcity of actual audience responses makes it an obvious choice for many scholars to focus on audience discourses based on analysis of media texts as indirect evidence of audiencing. Here, one should be mindful of the difference between what Orvar Löfgren terms Sunday culture and everyday culture (Löfgren, 1990, pp. 87-9) by which he means cultural discourse and actual cultural practices. This distinction has important analytical implications. For a focus on discourses invites a macro perspective where others speak about or on behalf of audiences. Thus, the analytical horizon is the contexts, conditions and implications of audiences' meaning-making practices.

Naturally, there is a constant interplay of audience discourses and practices. As Butsch notes: 'Nineteenth-century audiences were, and were expected to be, very active' (Butsch, 2000, p. 3). Dominant discourses on what audiences should or should not do may have what Roland Barthes terms a 'reality effect' whereby audiences repurpose particular discourses as frames of understanding their own media practices. It is also evident that actual audience practices may be inferred from analysis of audience discourses. For example, visual representations of children's reading situations are selective indications of 'readers' postures, their supervision, and of the ways in which they acquired their books' (Grenby, 2011, p. 23). So, reflexive approaches to modes of address may be particularly relevant in this dimension of analysis with a keen eye for the selectivity and contestations of voice.

### ***Meso analysis***

As noted, this analytical perspective favours a focus on short-term developments of audience engagements with particular media and in specific locations. This is a perspective where mixed methods are perhaps most relevant so that, for example, quantitative data on ticket sales, programming or publication figures are used in conjunction with qualitative analysis of meaning-making practices combining analysis of media texts, their professional reception and, less frequent, audience engagements. Given contextual specificity of time and space, it is easier to obtain analytical validity through methodological triangulation than is the case with macro analysis.

For example, Janet Staiger's now classical 'historical materialist' approach to reception studies includes a number of case studies of very early films. Noting that 'verbalized manifestations by a subject are not equal to the original experience and its memory', she disbands with any attempt to uncover actual audiences' manifest meaning-making practices (and, by the same token, discredits standard procedures applied in studies of current audience studies). Instead, she focuses on mapping the historical 'subject positions taken up by individual readers and spectators' (Staiger, 1992, p. 81). This mapping includes tracing the professional reception of particular films such as Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Staiger carefully analyses the contentious professional reception of the film. She contextualises the reception with respect to changing political controversies on race, violence and free speech while simultaneously drawing attention to ongoing theoretical issues of form vs. content and perceived media effects that the reception also catalysed (Staiger, 1992, pp. 139-53). While primarily drawing on qualitative data such as historical records and contemporary newspapers, magazines and trade journals, she also includes statistics on attempted censorship of the film, and a quantitative effects study.

Staiger's analysis documents that meso analysis more easily than macro analysis lends itself to an integrative understanding of particular discourses and audience themes for the simple reason that the analytical lens is narrower and more precise. Similar results are seen in reading research such as Eve Travor Bannet's study on 'paratextual reframings and rewritings' of transatlantic narratives by which she means professional modes of reception: 'What historical readers in the book trade – editors, printers, booksellers, composers, critics, reviewers and other writers – said about [the transatlantic narratives] or did with them' (Bannet, 2011, p. 12).

Anthropological studies of visual material also offer important inspiration for a meso perspective of analysis. For example, Mathias Boström's study of how the cylinder phonograph was used as a tool of data generation in anthropological field work early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is marked by an acute analytical attention to the contentious interplay of voices and of informants' joint performances: 'Some users oscillated between being audience and performer, others between being collectors behind the machine and demonstrators and performers in front of it' (Boström, 2011, p. 49). What field workers at the time took to be a neutral means of data collection for subsequent investigation is shown to be equally an object of investigation illuminating audiences' socially situated interpretation and production of a novel medium. Boström notes how his study helps push back existing assumptions of participatory media quoting Henry Jenkins to define the photocopier as the first participatory medium (Boström, 2011, p. 59). Thus, Boström's study serves to alert us to the rich analytical insights to be gained by revisiting existing visual data sources about the distant past asking novel questions and challenging old answers about concepts such as participatory media, audience reception and production.

### ***Micro analysis***

A micro perspective on distant audience practices invokes even more depth of analytical focus than macro and meso perspectives in terms of media genres, types of audience, time and location. The format is perhaps the most obvious to handle for individual scholars, and it is adopted by many studies. People beyond living memory have often included descriptions of reading situations in letters, diaries or autobiographical accounts, even people of humbler origin than scholars often acknowledge (Vincent, 1982). More important in analytical terms is it that micro analysis lends itself to investigate both media texts and actual audience interpretations. Both types of texts can be investigated through a combination of thematic analysis (what meanings are made) and formal analysis (how meanings are articulated). This rather complex analytical approach challenges historiographical traditions where focus is on thematic analysis of content, be it media texts or audience texts. For example, Matthew Grenby notes: 'Accounts of children reading novels abound in many kinds of life-writing, but not all are to be trusted' (Grenby, 2011, p. 114). To have trust as a basis of judgement demonstrates an analytical attention to substance, even normative evaluation, not to how and why biographical and other life-story authors shape their accounts the way they do.

In studying formal aspects of both media texts and audience articulations, micro analyses of distant audiencing may draw inspiration from memory studies, an approach that is also evident in existing studies on more recent audience practices using oral history testimonies (Bourdon, 2011). In her useful overview of methodologies in memory studies, Emily Keightley notes that 'the meaning of memory narratives are [sic] not straightforwardly assessed based on the commonsense meaning of the talk, but critically interpreted in terms of both form and content' (Keightley, 2010, p. 64). Analysing distant audiences' manifestations of their media practices with an attention to such formal aspects offers two opportunities. First, it opens for an attention to the partiality of official institutional, legal and technology accounts of the same genre or period at hand. Such attention is important because the further back in time we go, the more we base our media histories on institutional, legal or material, including technology, sources, as noted. Second, it opens for considerations on why audiences may have different focal points from official accounts. Such considerations help the conceptual advancement of audience studies, because it adds temporal depth, and hence validity, to the grounds on which we base our notions of entertainment, engagement or aesthetic judgement.

Similarly, attention to formal analysis of distant media texts offers scholars the opportunity to finesse existing audience histories. For example, in her case study of the home phonograph in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century USA Lisa Gitelman compares the representational codes of the records with company catalogues and advertisements. She concludes that 'the phonograph records frequently proved transgressive of the very cultural categories that they helped to represent as distinct or specific. Using the new medium offered *intercultural* experiences of varying intensity in addition to cultural experiences of varying weight' (Gitelman, 2006, p. 79. Emphasis in original). Thus, Gitelman's attention to formal aspects of



analysis helps dislodge standard binaries of gendered production and reception and dismantle neat hierarchies of taste.

In sum, analysing data about distant audience practices mobilises issues on how to balance media and people aspects, or text and context aspects (see **Figure 2**). A macro perspective tends to focus on long-term transformations where discourses about audiences is the obvious focus of attention. So, the analytical horizon is the contexts and conditions of audiencing and their implications for actual audiences' meaning-making processes. A meso perspective narrows the time-space focus somewhat, and studies will often combine thematic analysis of particular media texts or genres with the professional reception of these texts. Given its rather precise focus, a micro perspective offers perhaps the most sophisticated analytical approach to the study of distant audience practices. This is because it is easier to combine people and media aspects with an attention to substantive as well as formal elements. All three analytical perspectives may interlace social-science and arts and humanities traditions such as historiography, memory studies, reception theory and visual anthropology. Similarly, methodologies may vary in their elicitation of meaning-making properties, although critical, qualitative approaches are still prominent. The methodological options and obstacles facing scholars during the dimensions of data generation and analysis also play a part in the final phase of research, when results are communicated. Writing it down connects with writing it up.

**Figure 2:** Methodological issues in a holistic model of distant audiencing

Analytical perspective	Analytical dimension		
	<i>Generating data (what)</i>	<i>Analysing data (how)</i>	<i>Communicating data (who)</i>
Macro perspective	Mostly indirect data	Context focus	Normative fallacy
Meso perspective	Direct and indirect data	Context-text focus	Temporal fallacy
Micro perspective	Mostly direct data	Text-context focus	Intentional fallacy
<b>Analytical issue</b>	<i>Direct data/indirect data</i>	<i>Text/context focus</i>	<i>Voice</i>

### Communicating results

Communicating the results of research on distant audience practices shares the issue of voice with most other types of research. Which position does the researcher/author claim in relation to the selection and presentation of results? And what are the implications for potential recipients of the choices made? The answers made to these questions have significant inflections when the results concern the distant past. In terms of author position, three options present themselves: an author-led position, a recipient-led position, and a dialogic position (Schrøder et al., 2003). In an author-led position the researcher takes on an explicit rhetorical authority, and this position invites a focus on reporting past events in a realist fashion. In a recipient-led position, the researcher invokes a multiplicity of informant

voices trusting that recipients form their own narrative in line with postmodern methodological claims (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Finally, in a dialogic position the researcher highlights the process of interpretation as a joint effort involving author and informant exchanges. Communicating research on very distant audiences severely limits the choice of a recipient-led position, since researchers cannot consult informants on draft analyses to obtain internal validity. A dialogic position is possible but it is an option that is rarely seen in existing research, perhaps because dominant historiographical traditions tend to favour an author-led position. This position presents its own challenges of communication depending on the research perspective.

Since a macro-perspective focuses on normative discourses and the contexts of audience practices, researchers need to be particularly mindful of clarifying their own knowledge interests when communicating their research results in order not to fall victim to what may be termed a normative fallacy of communication. Drawing on my own experience of studying the history of media panics (Drotner 1992), I found it difficult to define an author voice at a distance from the often emotionally charged voices of my sources, yet documenting an intimate knowledge of their claims and contexts of interpretation.

When communicating results on studies adopting a meso-perspective, the issue of voice takes on different inflections. Because the spatio-temporal focus tends to be more limited than in macro-perspective studies, it is easy for the researcher to define an author position as neutral observer of past events, carefully balancing textual and contextual elements. This position limits assumptions of unfounded commonalities with the present, for example by comparing family readings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with family television of the 1950s and 1960s. But a focus on the pastness of the past also invokes what may be termed temporal fallacies, by which I mean insufficient attention to similarities as well as differences of audience practices across time and space.

Last, but not least, micro-perspective studies tend to foreground manifest audience practices as contextualized meaning-making processes. This perspective seems to bring the researcher closer to informants of the distant past and thus choose a communication position that vivify individual experience. While this position may be an ideal for researchers with a narrative and dramatic bent, it also very easily engenders what literary scholarship calls intentional fallacies. These are analytical and communicative positions where scholars apply psychological or biographical conjectures as means of textual interpretation. Darnton's skepticism of ever reaching sound empirical results on actual reading practices of the past may be borne out of such intentional fallacies: 'We have not yet devised a strategy for understanding the inner process by which readers made sense of words' (Darnton, 1986, p. 15).

Irrespective of the perspective taken, communicating results about audiences of the distant past invokes specific issues of author position, of the authority of voice (see **Figure 2**). These issues resonate with Hunt's plea to fellow historians, noted in my introduction, to avoid presentism in their construction of the past.

## Conclusion

The heuristic model presented in this article offers a holistic, if not exclusive, methodological approach to studying media audiences of the distant past. For each analytical dimension, it specifies key methodological issues that scholars need to handle, and it presents dilemmas that each of these issues engender. The examples provided in the article document how different authors approach and tackle these dilemmas, thus generating a pool of experience that future scholars may draw on. Taken together, the model and the examples demonstrate how studies of distant audiences are possible, feasible and productive both in empirical and theoretical terms, because they push existing boundaries of understanding. In theoretical terms, the push mobilises reflection on concepts that media scholars often take for granted based on current contexts and conditions – active audiences, reading, media technologies. In empirical terms, the push catalyses attention to a wider terrain of investigation, thus solidifying our understanding of how people orient themselves in the world. With Barbie Zelizer, ‘looking backward will hopefully take us forward, teaching us about what has been but also about what our future might look like’ (Zelizer, 2008, p. 11). In that vein, it may be permissible to conclude that extending our professional knowledge of the distant past may ultimately deepen our respect for the temporality of experience. The past may be a foreign country, but it is still a country populated by humans who have used the media at hand to make sense of that country and of themselves.

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