

Media for the crowds: Audiences beyond dispersed masses

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Abstract:

During the early modern period, direct interaction of producers of news and crowded audiences characterized the relation between audiences and the new media of printing. Based on enlightenment, industrialization, and the subsequent development of mass societies, mass media for dispersed masses became the dominant concept of modernity. As a consequence of digital media and the internet, today traditional mass media are losing their function as gatekeepers, crowd-based communication and different ways of direct interaction between users and producers have become ubiquitous. Focusing on early modern media change and the diffusion of the printing press in Europe, the aim of this article is to discuss early modern audiences against the background of the dispersed masses of modern legacy media and the new, crowded audiences of the digital age of networks.

Keywords: Early modern period, Europe, broadsheets, pamphlets, crowds, public sphere, media change, mass media, digital media

Introduction

From the early modern period onwards, the development of media audiences can be described as having been a slow but constant shift from media consumption by small and decentralized gatherings toward the development of dispersed masses of consumers. Both mass media and mass communication represented the *modern* way of media and journalism, especially during the 20th century. However, history is not a teleological path towards a better – or at least more developed – future, but an open process of transformation and change. Today we are facing a shift towards new crowd-based audiences, linked by digital networks.

Focusing on early modern media change and the diffusion of the printing press in Europe, the aim of this article is to discuss early modern audiences against the background of the dispersed masses of modern legacy media and the new, crowded audiences of the digital age of networks.

Early modern audiences and their media

Introducing new media certainly has an impact on audiences and societies. Nevertheless, the extent as well as the modality of these changes depend on the particular way audiences receive and accept these inventions (cf. Pettegree 2014, 59; Eisenstein 2005).

During the early modern period, generally understood as the period lasting from the Renaissance to the French Revolution, the invention of the printing press accelerated and broadened access to information in Europe. Briggs and Burke (2009, 45) stress the economic aspect of the invention of the printing press and ‘the close involvement of entrepreneurs in the process of spreading knowledge’. However, printing did not only change the production and reception of news, it also changed people’s perception of reality and ‘modified practices of devotion, of entertainment, of information, and of knowledge’ (Chartier 1989, 1). Previously often reduced to a propagandistic medium – particularly with regard to the Reformation – notably woodcuts and (illustrated) broadsheets became an essential part of everyday life during the 16th century and played a fundamental role in forming early modern society (Schilling 1990, 2; Moxey 2004, 19–34). At the same time, Briggs and Burke (2009, 19) argue for a more realistic view on printing, ‘as a catalyst, assisting social changes rather than originating them’.

Hence, the assumption that the ability to read and write spread across Europe during the 16th century as a consequence of printing, has to be made with caution. Because of the very heterogeneous situations of the sources we cannot make general assumptions. Moreover, different regions and social levels also developed very differently. School reforms and literacy campaigns did not change the situation until the 19th century (Goetsch 1994, 4). Instead, without regard to the actual literacy rate of the people, we have to consider the pre-modern audience’s ability to read pictures and decode figurative references. Sources for this kind of referencing could have been the Bible, popular tales and fables, or even texts from ancient Greece and Rome (cf. Oggolder 2014, 40). Houston (2013, 4) claims that the categories *literate* versus *illiterate* ‘are best seen not as discrete categories, but as steps in a hierarchy of skills. At the same time, seeing and listening could bridge the gap between literate and illiterate’. Moxey (2004, 24) argues that literacy ‘is of little help in determining what groups or classes may have been interested in the broadsheets beyond the suggestion that they would have been more accessible to those who had traditionally been literate than to those who had not’.

In contrast to today’s folders and printed info materials which are distributed for free, the broadsheets of the 16th and 17th century were economic products. Thus, they were sold in the streets, at markets, and fairs via colportage, and their main intention was to satisfy people’s craving for sensation. Broadsheets, especially illustrated ones, mostly were

about events and actions and focused on a figurative climax like catastrophes, battles, coronations, crimes, and executions (Schilling 1990, 110). Hence, '[n]ews also became, for the first time, part of the entertainment industry' (Pettegree 2014, 6). On the other hand, more detailed descriptions of political events such as declarations of war, peace treaties, official statements etc. were often published via bulky pamphlets and books. According to the contents, the audiences of these pamphlets and books were far smaller than those of illustrated broadsheets. The same applies to the periodic prints, which experienced a more elitist narrowing of their audiences (cf. Oggolder 2014, 40).

The selling price of a medium was likewise an important issue with regard to its spread. The cheapest product, the single sheet woodcuts, certainly showed the highest social dispersion. In addition, each single copy had more than one reader, watcher or listener. On the other side of the price range, the more expensive periodical, often sold by subscription, excluded most of the common people as audiences. With regard to content issues, illustrated broadsheets, also accessible to the illiterate, could obviously target a broader audience than scholarly books of fifty or one hundred pages written in Latin. Nevertheless, Davis (1975, 212) claims that 'artisans found ways to have access [even to these] printed materials without collecting them privately. They bought a book, read it until they were finished, or until they needed cash, and then pawned it with an innkeeper or more likely sold it to a friend or to a *libraire*'.

Crowds beyond dispersed masses

Given that the producers of broadsheets and pamphlets did not work solely as printers but also as authors, engravers, editors, publishers and even as vendors of their own products, the common form of distribution of leaflets and pamphlets was realized at fairs and via peddling. Therefore much, if not most of early modern journalism, was sold through face to face contact with the recipient. Attracting audiences with sympathy and credibility was not a negligible task. Peter Burke states that for these producers of broadsheets and pamphlets 'it was easier to change their audiences than their repertoire, and to change their audience they had to travel from town to town or from fair to fair, stopping at such villages as might be on the way' (Burke 2009, 139).

This manner of selling media in trading areas and urban surroundings goes hand in hand with the 'gatherings of people physically together and sharing a common activity', which sociologically defines crowds (Butsch 2008, 9). Butsch emphasizes the contrast to a mass 'that is a dispersed population' and distinguishes both, crowds and masses from publics 'that exhibit a dimension of debate or discussion absent in a crowd or mass' (ibid.). Also stressing that 'the mass is generally dispersed', Chakotin argues from a psychological point of view that 'its individuals are not in touch with one another, and psychologically this is an important distinction' (Chakotin 1940/2017, 37). The early modern recipients of printed media, however, usually were in touch with one another, be it at the market during the purchase of the printings or when reading them aloud together. Thus, the reception of broadsheets was often a collective event, '[...] reading aloud was common, as was

discussion of printed works' (Scribner 1987, 277). Shared contents of printed media triggered oral follow-up communication and the building of crowded audiences.

This argument is essential for a better understanding of the premodern media system. Hence, three aspects are notable: first, the printings obviously served as economic products; second, content mostly was not produced for a specific audience; and therefore third, audiences were exchangeable locally. In other words, the early modern audiences did not establish a dispersed mass reached by media products such as those during later eras, particularly the late 19th and the 20th century.

Audiencing symbolic capital

Researching audiences during the early modern period is commonly linked to the invention of the printing press. Nevertheless, we have to consider that, of course, beyond the use of the printing press other forms of communication existed as well. Orality, public performances, rituals etc. played an important role prior to Gutenberg's invention, but also since then. Couldry and Hepp (2017, 42) argue that '[i]t would be too crude therefore to equate the invention of the printing press with a leap into a media environment consisting only of books and newspapers. The media environment remained diverse and was characterized by interactions between various media'. According to this, royal self-manifestation, for example, kept on using traditional forms of communicating the symbolic capital of sovereignty through splendid parades and thrilling spectacles.

The hierarchical society of the early modern period was primarily not constituted by individual ownership but rather by his or her respective birth into a particular rank. Hence, ranks were not primarily separated by individual wealth but by the share of *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu 1998, 47). The higher the level of symbolic capital, the more necessary was the demonstration of grandeur toward the ranks below. Hence, aristocrats and sovereigns had to demonstrate their respective position within the hierarchy of ranks through appropriate buildings and apparel but also by organizing suitable festivals and ceremonies. For the Baroque prince, life from birth to death was a series of representational festivals.

Moreover, for the king, etiquette was not only a distancing instrument but also an instrument of domination. The people did not believe in a power which was present but not visible in the appearance of the ruler himself. The people had to have the opportunity to watch the authority in order to believe in it. At the same time, the more distant a king appeared, the greater was the respect of his people.

Accordingly, established rituals of jurisdiction and punishment served as royal demonstration of power. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, sovereigns imposed their laws by means of the tortured, mutilated or destroyed bodies of criminals (cf. Muchembled 1985). Each form of physical punishment had to fulfil a certain function. The cruelty of punishment had to match the dreadfulness of the crime, which was judged and expiated by these means. In order to fulfil the intended function of punishment in its full range, the presence of an audience was required. This 'theater of horror' (Van Dülmen 1985) could serve as an act of deterrence and demonstration of sovereign power most

effectively given the presence of spectators, but also through depictions. The sensory perception of tormenting, frightening and annihilating a 'bad body' should simultaneously weaken any prospective resistance of those bodies who constitute the public. In his study of the 'tortured and dishonored body' Wolfgang Schild (1992, 160) refers to the increasing importance of depictions of hell and the damned in images of the Last Judgment. The visualization of both dangers – the physical and the metaphysical – was directed at the unbelievers and disobedient, showing the consequences of their actions, and serving as a call for repentance. At the same time, the faithful and obedient were encouraged to hold on to their virtue. The fear concerning the fate of the unbelievers and disobedient people should support them in doing so.

Media reports about public executions facilitated a broadening of the participating public and thus at the same time a potentiation of the underlying intention. Any type of media acted as reinforcement. The mediated demonstration of sovereignty by means of leaflets and broadsheets enabled a much larger number of people all over the land to participate in these events. Thus, such printings, on the one hand, could have been ordered by sovereigns to spread the narration of their power across the country and, on the other hand, printers could use contents of this genre simply to gain more economic success.

A remarkable event of this kind was the execution of François Ravailac, the assassin of French King Henry IV in 1610. Describing a general popular outrage during the brutal execution in Paris, images on illustrated broadsheets¹ depicted the individual stages of the execution ceremony. The message of these pamphlets was clear: with one accord the people were against criminals, and regicides in particular.

Early modern cross-media strategies

The public presentation of religious denominations, of course, differed considerably from the royal self-representation. Confessional groups were primarily not concerned with the demonstration of power within a hierarchical order that is generally accepted by society, but rather – in simplified terms – with the promotion of their particular positions within a religious conflict. On the one hand, Protestants had to prove their right to exist, and on the other hand, the Catholic side tried to convincingly present the reform of the old Roman church, which it considered successful, not least in order to deprive the Lutheran Reformation of its legitimacy.

The reorganization of ecclesiastical structures, the precise formulation of one's own theological position in a clear contrast to the religious confession of the others, educational activities and increased centralization are some striking keywords for characterizing the Catholic renewal movement, in which the Jesuits played a crucial role (cf. O'Malley et al. 1999). Their concept was basically simple, which explains its success: Theological disputes in response to the Reformation should no longer bother the common people. Instead, they should be reached with religious emotionality. Catholic discourse was no longer addressed exclusively to the intellectual audience, but rather to the hearts of the faithful².

Based on the idea of reaching the audiences affectively, children became one main target of the Jesuits' anti Protestant efforts. On the one hand, they established schools in order to present educational contents and on the other hand, they organized theatrical performances and amateur theatres in order to touch the people, especially the younger ones, emotionally. Performance reports and texts of plays show that since the end of the 16th century, cross-media strategies using images, emblems, processions, dance and music intended to reinforce the message of moral education. Additionally, they also served to guide non-Latin viewers. In their early days, these performances were often part of city festivals organized by the sovereign for purposes of self-manifestation and serving as well for the reconstitution of the denominational consensus. According to chroniclers such performances were public and, particularly because of their magnificent scenic and musical efforts, they enjoyed great success (cf. Bauer 1994, 200). The main intention of these cross-media activities was to support local gatherings of people in order to communicate religious concerns to crowds directly. Although taking part in these activities publicly, audiences did not create a public sphere in the modern sense of the word. Below I will discuss this concept of the modern public sphere in order to contrast it with both the premodern public gatherings of crowds and the new digital gatherings in social networks.

Public spheres and dispersed masses

Dealing with phenomena of information and communication we find ourselves confronted with questions concerning the (virtual) room, the space, the sphere, where those phenomena occur. Commonly this sphere is called 'public' (cf. Habermas 1989; Butsch 2011), thematizing 'the role of interaction among citizens in the political process' (Dahlgren 1996, 7). In addition, the conception of 'public' always provokes its counterpart 'of what constitutes the "private"' (ibid.). From a historical point of view, the phenomenon 'public sphere' challenges us twice: on the one hand, the concept necessitates a basic definition of the term, which does not yet take historical aspects into account. On the other hand, analyzing the structural changes of the 'public sphere' one has to consider the diachronic perspective. In this context historical aspects are very much required (cf. Lake and Pincus 2006).

The establishment of the bourgeois public sphere can be considered as a pivotal point between the era of a multitude of segmented mediated publics like the publics of the court society, religious and confessional publics, civic publics in cities, and local publics of rural villages during the 16th and 17th century, on the one hand, and the development of mass societies, mass culture and of course mass media addressing dispersed masses since the 19th century, on the other.

The Habermasian assumption of a literate and arguing audience is restricted to literate and leisured elites (cf. Habermas, 1989). Based on education and urban culture, the bourgeois society was eager to separate itself emphatically from both the nobility and the lower classes of artisans, petty bourgeois, peasants and servants. Fostered by print media like magazines, newspapers, and books the bourgeoisie succeeded in developing its own

bourgeois identity as a new urban class during the 18th and 19th century. Hence, this assumption of a well-educated and politically active middle class that is engaged in political affairs and exercises public control functions can therefore – if at all – only be made for this particular period of time. People, audiences and media consumers were engaged in politics and public affairs prior to the Habermasian bourgeois society and likewise after it. Nonetheless, the concept became the ideal for the modern democracy. Yet this idea of a bourgeois public sphere was a concept of elites, neither democratic, nor incorporating the entire population. Bourgeois women were excluded and confined to the private sphere of the bourgeois nuclear family. In contrast to the print media of the public sphere, the handwritten now shifted into the sphere of the private. Moreover, public was valorized in multiple ways over private, ‘rational versus emotional, disinterested versus biased, participatory versus withdrawn, shared versus individualized, visible versus hidden’ (Livingstone 2005, 18).

Based on urbanization and industrialization, the foundation of mass parties and their newspapers, and finally the establishment of democratic forms of government subsequently applied the model of the bourgeois public to all citizens – equal in rights and duties. Mass media and journalism became the basis for enabling every citizen to participate in critical discourses on state affairs. In a democratic context, this concept should not be one of exclusion, but one of integration. Nevertheless, Nerone notes the irony that, ‘journalists believe that they should and do make democratic government possible by making information available to people, who then discuss it and think about it and make up their minds and vote. It would be nice if that would be the way things work’ (Nerone 2015, 2).

Today we have a fundamental crisis of this modern concept of mass media and journalism (cf. Oggolder et al 2020; Nerone, 2015; Trappel, Steemers, and Thomass 2015; Mancini 2013). According to their historic legacy, Axel Bruns (2005, 218) described traditional media as mass-produced goods, like products of everyday life. Produced industrially, shaped as identical objects and following the tradition of Fordism, they offer uniform products for each customer. Professional and industrial production is no benefit on its own anymore and this holds true for both material and immaterial goods – like journalism. Thus, audiences of the age of individualization (cf. Beck 2009, 54) favor interactivity and customizability more than standardized mass products. Bruns states that the new forms of news production, based on digital media and social networks, are ‘interactive and customizable by users’ (Bruns 2005, 218). Hence, producers and consumers of news are not strictly separated anymore. The individual – as a collective or a single person – is attributed more importance, audiences may emerge from mass cultural uniformity and act beyond dispersed masses. Nevertheless, both the benefits and the drawbacks of personalized media products are recognized to an increasing degree (cf. Ananny, 2018; Braun and Eklund 2019).

The consequences regarding the concept of the modern public sphere are evident. The ‘late modern’ (Nerone 2015, 184) public sphere can be characterized as being ‘disrupted’ into a multitude of public spheres (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018) and ‘crowded with

a larger number of actors' (Mancini 2013, 56). Nerone (2015, 185) argues that '[t]echnologies reinforced social practices [...] that disaggregated mass audiences into audience fragments', which may be considered as crowds, as audiences beyond dispersed masses.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to draw a line from early modern audience crowds in Europe to the new, crowded audiences of the digital age of networks. From the early modern period onwards, the development of media audiences can be described as having been a slow but constant shift from media consumption by small and decentralized gatherings toward the development of dispersed masses of consumers.

Prior to professionally produced mass media, direct interaction of producers, sellers and sometimes even performers of news and crowded audiences characterized the relation between audiences and the new media of printing. Based on enlightenment, industrialization, and the subsequent development of mass societies, mass media for dispersed masses became the dominant concept of modernity.

As a consequence of digital media and the internet, today traditional mass media are losing their function as gatekeepers. Crowd-based communication and different ways of direct interaction between users and producers have become ubiquitous. On the downside, fake news and discussions about journalistic credibility alienate the audiences. Thus, in the end, we are forced to rethink traditional concepts of audiences and the public sphere.

Biographical note:

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Notes:

¹ For example: *Neue Zeitung. Waß massen der Ubelthäter FRANCOIS ROVEII ein Frantzoß [...]*, Augsburg 1610.

² However, neither Protestant audiences nor Catholic ones were usually addressed as members of a particular congregation because both sides claimed to represent the true – also in the sense of genuine – Christian faith (Oggolder 2014).