

In dialogue with related fields of inquiry: The interdisciplinarity, normativity and contextuality of audience research

David Mathieu,
Roskilde University, Denmark

Maria José Brites,
Lusophone University of Porto and Communication and Society
Research Centre, Portugal

Niklas A. Chimirri,
Roskilde University, Denmark

Minna Saariketo,
University of Tampere, Finland

Abstract:

This paper explores the borders of audience research with help of interviews of nine scholars who operate in related fields of inquiry. Inspired by the method of interactive interview, our dialogue with these scholars was encouraged by and serve to document the reflexivity involved in audience research in a manner unachievable by a traditional review of literature, offering a complement to CEDAR's objective to review the field. We identify and illustrate three major constituents by which audience research organizes its borders: interdisciplinarity, normativity and contextuality. We contend that audience research needs to engage more explicitly in a discussion of its repertoire in relation to these three constituents.

Keywords: Audience Research, Interactive Interview, Scholarly Discourse, Reflexivity, Interdisciplinarity, Normativity, Contextuality.

Audience research is a broad field of inquiry within media and communication studies. But the interest for 'audiences' is even broader when one considers that much research in the humanities and social sciences involves the empirical study of audiences, whether or not it is conceptualised as such. In spite of the landmarks (e.g. Hall, 1980; Alasuutari, 1999), and the handbooks produced to document its practices (e.g. Nightingale, 2011, Schrøder et al., 2003), it is not always clear what constitutes audience research, what to make of its diversity, what legitimacies it inspires, or who explicitly embraces its traditions. There are disagreements concerning the main narrative to adopt (e.g. Das, 2014; Barker, 2006), and it is difficult to establish a red thread across different ways of doing audience research. What is understood by 'text', by 'audience', as well as by their relationship seems to vary strongly throughout various strands of empirical research (Livingstone, 2013, 2004).

Against this backdrop, there is a lot to learn about audience research from the ways related fields of inquiry understand, conceptualize, research and document audiences. To this aim, this paper will explore the borders of audience research with help of interviews of scholars that can be said to engage in empirical research with audiences, but who take their visiting cards from other fields of inquiry. We interviewed Cathrine Hasse (2015, 2013), Simone Tosoni (2013a, 2013b) and Ian Tucker (2014a, 2014b) in relation to science and technology studies, David Buckingham (2013, 2012/2003) and Sonia Livingstone (2013, 2004) in relation to media literacy, Susan Bennett (1997) and Matthew Reason (2015, 2010) in relation to theatre and performance studies, as well as Emiliano Treré (2016, 2015) and Thomas Tufte (2014, 2005) in relation to communication for social change. These fields were chosen out of the interests of the authors of this paper for their relevance and various connections with audience research. We attempted, within the limitations of a qualitative inquiry, to bring a diverse range of possible relationships with audience research, while at the same time securing a common ground in interviewing at least two scholars from each field.

Three constituents of audience research

Given these points of departure and the ensuing interviews held with nine researchers, we identified three major constituents, namely interdisciplinarity, normativity and contextuality, that have been foundational for establishing and developing audience research. We believe these three constituents to play a major role in allowing audience research to establish its borders - which remain porous - and hence its relationship with other fields of research. In other words, questions of interdisciplinarity, normativity and contextuality are influencing the ways audience research establishes its place within the wider research landscape in constant interaction with other fields of research.

These constituents tend to be little discussed in empirical studies that explicitly position themselves in the field of audience research, possibly because a certain understanding of how to relate one's investigation to these constituents is already implied or even taken for granted. With this project, we wished to encourage reflexivity in the practice of audience research and we saw the dialogues and confrontations to related fields

of inquiry as a fitting environment to do so. It is by asking scholars of related fields to reflect on their relationship with audience research that these constituents emerged as relevant, yet still implicit considerations, across the sheer variety of perspectives that were discussed.

One of the challenges – as well as strengths – of audience research is that it is interdisciplinary and constantly in dialogue with other fields. This interdisciplinarity has implications for the way audience research is constructed in its relation to other fields, inheriting tensions, issues and conceptions from the ways researchers from other disciplines look at audiences. In fact, the vast majority of scholars interviewed for this paper have been engaged in interdisciplinary research, which testifies to this important character of our field.

We believe normativity to be another important constituent of audience research. One way to look at the overall motivations behind research is Habermas' (1972) division of knowledge interests into three broad categories – practical, emancipatory and technical. However, these interests are not simply a prescriptive project to be defined at the beginning of a research project, but are influenced by underlying normative conceptions at play in research (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Butsch, 2008). For example, effect research on media violence often presupposes a vulnerable or inadequate audience and a harmful text (The St Louis Court Brief, 2003). Such normativity also involves complex alliances between stakeholders, which shows that audience research is never really neutral in its investigations (Brites, 2015).

Another challenge for audience research is that the notion of audience appears and is used in various ways in a variety of contexts. As remarked by Carpentier (2011) or Livingstone (1999), this has caused confusions in what exactly is meant by 'audiencing' and what relation 'audience' has to other conceptions of the researched subject (such as producer, consumer, citizen or social actor). For example, audiencing is often understood as a culturally-specific mode of action which involves reading a sign (a text, a performance, a representation, etc.). As Ridell (2014) argues, this definition excludes many media-related activities that are subsumed under 'audiencing' especially in the context of digital media in media audience research, as well as in related fields. Thus, lack of precision in definitions, and their inevitable ramifications to specific contexts, is a continuous source for reflection, tension and misinterpretation in the field.

Going in dialogue with related fields of research

To develop our methodology, we have sought inspiration from the method of interactive interviewing (Ellis, 2015). The method, in contrast to an expert interview (Bogner & Littig, 2009), emphasises the joint construction of meaning that takes place during interviewing (Ellis, 2015). The shared knowledge produced by the interactive interview follows from the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, resulting in a possibility for each part to learn from one another. We adopted a constructionist approach, which directly relates to the way we see our role as interviewers and contributors to this paper. While we all acknowledge some connections to the field, we are aware that we cannot pretend to represent audience research and its diversity, scope and depth. Similarly, we acknowledge

the unique trajectory of our interviewees and do not consider them to represent their respective field of research.

We have explored the possibilities offered by the interactive interview through a variety of formats, means and techniques in order to encourage symmetrical interaction and maintain its momentum. The interviews took their point of departure in relevant works provided by the interviewees and in the vast literature that discusses or challenges the field of audience research and its concepts.¹ By not having a standardised and pre-established interview guide, we wanted to engage the diversity amongst us and our interviewees in order to encourage the production of dynamic and emergent knowledge. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Skype. Interviewees were briefed about the objectives of the study and the desired format of the interview. In an attempt to subvert the traditional structure of an interview, interviewees were encouraged to ask questions as well. The discussions involved various artefacts, such as quotations from various literature or keywords, to maintain attention on the interaction.

The usefulness of the interactive interview to our project resides in its capacity to explore the relationships between audience research and related fields of research, to encourage and document the reflexivity of the researchers involved in the field, in a manner that was not achievable by a traditional review of literature. In practice, the application of the interactive interview was more challenging than expected. It was easy to fall back into the format of an expert interview, especially as the interview participants were indeed experts in their field. It appeared clear to us that the interactive interview was more an ideal to tend to, rather than a way to characterise exhaustively the kind of data we obtained. In retrospect, the interview method appears as a proper tool for reviewing the field with respect to our questions and has provided us access to literature and research rationales that would not be considered otherwise, thus providing a relevant complement to CEDAR's literature review (see other contributions in this special issue).

In the following, we present a synthesis of the interviews for what they reveal of the role that interdisciplinarity, normativity and contextuality play in audience research. In doing so, we have deliberately avoided to report our findings in the form of interview quotation as is typically practiced. This rationale stems from our reliance on the interactive interview, in which knowledge is co-produced, hence not easily accountable. Moreover, we believe that individual quotations do not bring value to a synthesis which tries to cut across different viewpoints. On the contrary, the use of quotations presents the risk of individualising manifold fields of research and may insinuate that our interviewees are representatives of their field, which is problematic with regard to our possibilities of generalising our findings.

Interdisciplinarity: Ideas received, challenged and renewed

Just as much as audience research is an interdisciplinary field of study positioned at the crossroads between the human and the social sciences and institutionally represented at a variety of departments, the same applies to the related fields of research we went into

dialogue with. For instance, 'new audience research' (Corner, 1991) can be historically seen to be grounded in a critique of structuralism and functionalism, developing through debates across cultural studies, media and communication studies, and social psychology. Science and technology studies emerged from a similar critique, but more explicitly drew inspiration from philosophy of science and technology, as well as social and cultural anthropology. Accordingly, our interviewees seldom position themselves in one field of study or one theoretical tradition, thereby creating openings for extending their standpoints as well as the field of audience research and for questioning the borders drawn around specific approaches. Although different researchers may be interested in similar phenomena, such as the audience-media interaction, theoretical concepts as well as empirical methods may vary widely.

Accordingly, as different fields of research come to interact, directly or indirectly, with the repertoires of audience research, ideas are being exchanged and developed. In the following, we wish to document how interdisciplinarity puts pressure on audience research, but also creates opportunities to enrich its repertoire. To this end, we will provide examples of concepts used in audience research which have been well-received in other fields, some being more or less heavily adapted to new realities, but also concepts which have been challenged.

One main idea of producing reception analyses of texts is to document the diversity of interpretations that recipients produce. The idea that audiences receive, make sense and use texts in a diversity of ways and conditions - reflecting different motivations, aspirations and expectations - is crucial in both audience research and other fields, such as media literacy and theatre and performance studies. While generalisation in reception research does not benefit from a proliferation of individual cases, it can be achieved by modelling different processes, patterns or strategies by which people receive texts, that is, modelling diversity (interview with Reason). Diversity is also important in media literacy, as the multiplicity of platforms presupposes complex modes of audiencing that are much more interesting than previously (Interview with Livingstone). In a similar vein, some strands of science and technology studies explore how people learn in diverse ways through their respective meaning-making engagement with the world, ergo their everyday material actions including text reading (interview with Hasse).

Yet, some of the core ideas and concepts of audience research are also heavily challenged in other fields. For example, in theatre and performance studies, the point is made that reception is not an encounter with one text at the time, but that attention needs to be paid to the whole 'ecology' of the relationship (interview with Reason). Curiously, the interview with Emiliano Treré revealed a lack of links between audience research and studies on alternative media as the question of reception seems to have attracted few researchers so far. On his behalf, Simone Tosoni called into question the relevance of the audience perspective in the study of media usage in urban space.

The concept of active audience has provided presumptive interpretations on other phenomena of interests, which have difficulties to emerge under this paradigm (see also

Behrenshausen, 2013). The idea that the audience immerses itself in the text can also be seen as an active uptake of the text rather than the expression of a passive audience. While the capacity to suspend disbelief and be carried away by the text is regarded as a sign of proper audiencing in theatre and performance studies, as a desire to learn something from the text (interview with Reason), it has often been denigrated as ideological submission in media studies – semiotic resistance being the proper response (Fiske, 1990). The notion of active audience was also introduced together with a rhetoric of emancipation in connection to the web 2.0, which was seen to complicate the study of social movements (interview with Tréré). Reception also expresses a media-centric perspective, which is not always adequate to understand all forms of media engagement (interview with Tosoni).

The notion of audience agency is also the object of debates as it circulates in various fields. While the study of social movements reveals a ‘blind spot’ in its lack of consideration to audience (interview with Tréré; Rauch, 2015; Downing, 2003), it prefers the notion of voice, which emphasises other conceptions of agency, for example by making the links clearer between news or social change and the civil society (interviews with Tufte and Tréré). In science and technology studies, agency is regarded as relational and distributed (interviews with Tucker and Hasse), ergo agency is not considered as being bound to individuals, but in its ongoing interplay with material objects; a view that contrasts with the semiotic conception of agency. The poles created between a powerful media and a powerful audience, finally, also appear difficult to analytically separate within a media literacy perspective, in which both perspectives are sought to be conciliated (interview with Buckingham).

The exchange of ideas potentially leads to foreign concepts being integrated in audience research. But this may be difficult to achieve for different reasons. Concepts should not be imported blindly without reflection (interview with Tosoni). At times, the exchange may appear unbalanced. Researchers in media literacy need to take into consideration the broader field of audience research, while the latter does not always see media literacy as part of its endeavour (interview with Livingstone). Audience research is seen as a more stable field, with its historical roots and stabilized concepts, at least compared to media literacy, where the very notion of literacy is recent and still an object of debate (interview with Buckingham). Science and technology studies’ strong focus on the study of technology reveals a conceptual reservation towards taking up the (mass) media concept of audience research, as it may connote a too structural and sceptic reading of what experiences and potentialities technology can co-produce (interview with Tucker).

Normativity: Representations of and alliances with stakeholders

A constant discussion across many of our interviews concerns the attitudes and understandings brought by researchers in their conduct of audience research. Chimirri (2013) noted that audience researchers are themselves consumers of media, bringing their own understandings and concerns into their studies, to the point where Dhoest (2015) suggests auto-ethnography as a legitimate methodology in audience research. As an

illustration, consider how scholars in theatre and performance studies may identify with the production of artful texts (interview with Reason), and hence command a different understanding of their research than dedicated fans or academics who actively research the relation between media and their own identity (e.g. feminist or queer research).

In the following section, we discuss relevant representations articulated within different fields of inquiry, providing examples of typical or idealistic conceptions of the producers, texts and audiences inbuilt in research, including ideas that researchers may have of themselves. Secondly, we present evidence of the alliances that researchers may form, explicitly or implicitly, with producers, texts or audiences. These examples help understand how normativity is shaping different knowledge interests in audience research.

Curiosity for the aesthetic text explains why the phenomenological concept of experience appears central in theatre and performance studies, more than in media audience research, which, since Hall (1980), has built on a critique of mass media. In theatre and performance studies, it is clear that the notion of art influences the conception of the text and the positioning of scholars towards their object of study. The text of theatre and performance studies is said to present artful knowledge and deliver the possibility of an enriching and transformative experience to the audience, thus encouraging the study of close and in-depth readings and discouraging an objective posture from the part of the researcher (interview with Reason). Additionally, the aesthetic text of theatre and performance studies is an emancipatory text that is best used by a curious and inquisitive audience (interview with Reason). Contrary to critical media studies, which have always maintained a suspicion towards the media (Mathieu, 2015), the text of theatre and performance studies is one which is invested with trust by scholars.

Distinctions established between two different approaches in communication for social change - the strategic approach and the social movement approach - reveal the differences involved in the representations of the text, and how these differences contribute to shape separate knowledge interests. For example, the text of the strategic approach is seen to be clearer, more narrowly designed and organizationally-driven, with the aim of creating an impact that can be measured. It constitutes an invited space, which citizens can invest, with a predefined and inflexible agenda. Driven by citizens, the text of the social movement is more about voice than about a concrete message, even though it eventually comes together around key narratives (interview with Tufte).

The ideal audience of theatre and performance studies is one who both invests and loses herself fully in the moment, across different texts and experiences (interview with Reason). The researcher can even use herself as a point of departure for research (interview with Bennett), thus representing also an ideal image of the audience. In the specific context of young audiences, the signifier 'children' may be said to encapsulate an ideal-type of audience in theatre and performance studies, because of their unconditional imaginative investment with what resonates with them combined with a critical and unforgiving restlessness with what does not (interview with Reason). This contrasts the conception of

children evoked in the effect tradition of media studies as being inadequate, incomplete and vulnerable.

Children are often socially constructed as innocent, but this image rarely holds in empirical research. This is the case in media literacy, which conceives children as resourceful and social, in a constant attempt to oppose the conception of children as vulnerable and passive recipients of harmful content. However, this needs to be done in a way that is also compatible with the overall objectives of media literacy, because celebrating the knowledge and competence of children may result in adults and especially stakeholders withdrawing their support (interview with Livingstone). Science and technology studies perspectives may in turn question individualizing approaches to researching the audience-media, including the child-technology relationship (interview with Hasse). They normatively suggest that the person is always already interrelated with whatever they engage in, and this comprises of other persons as well.

These representations inform certain alliances between researchers and their objects of study. For example in communication for social change, research may be suspicious of mainstream media and sympathetic with alternative media, whose text is seen to articulate a critique of the social order, challenging the status quo defended by the mainstream. The interest is in the voice provided by alternative media and hence knowledge interests have leaned towards the study of the conditions of production, explaining the 'blind spot' of alternative media studies concerning audience research (interview with Tréré).

As hinted at before, a positivistic posture in theatre and performance studies is also being made untenable by the relationship that the researcher maintains with various stakeholders, ranging from teaching theatre production to students or working closely with organizations and practitioners in the field (interview with Reason and Bennett). This could also be observed in other fields that navigate between academic and other kinds of research, such as communication for social change.

The presence of a normative stance is more acknowledged in some fields than others. This is clearly the case in research about communication for social change (interviews with Tufte and Tréré), which is based on explicit progressive values. For example, the model of journalism based on citizen engagement used in alternative media should serve as a model for mainstream journalism (interview with Tréré). Media literacy can also be said to maintain a normative agenda (interview with Buckingham), although its implications have been an object of debates, oscillating between protecting and empowering. The role of the researcher is to offer guidance and knowledge to various stakeholders, not least about what citizens need to know to be functioning citizens in a mediated world, for without putting appropriate pressure on industries and regulators, they will come to neglect the interests of the citizens (interview with Livingstone). But researchers should also ask citizens directly whether they need media literacy in the same way researchers assume they do (interview with Buckingham). In science and technology studies, both alliances and normative stances can vary widely, depending on how much

focus is put on the researcher's impossibility to analytically separate the researcher perspective from the stakeholders' perspectives. Nevertheless, science and technology studies representatives are usually very clear that research is also a political endeavour, and needs to be reflected and done as such.

Contextuality: The audience and the researcher as contextual actors

The interdisciplinarity and normativity of audience research are mirrored in the multiple understandings of *context* and implications of acknowledging *contextuality*. Context has been a central analytical category in audience research (Mathieu & Brites, 2015) and much of the humanities and social sciences. Consequently, considerations for 'context' were present in every interview conducted, whilst the variety of interpretations ranges from the concept being an essential analytic tool to it being analytically superfluous, as it is inevitably already embedded in the phenomenon of interest. Whatever we came to learn about contextuality from the interviews conducted, questions of and to context can never be posed without also considering questions of (inter-)disciplinarity as well as normativity. In this section, we discuss different implications that follow from the ways audiences are embedded or theorised in different contexts.

The need for reflection and elaboration over concepts increases when explicitly researching across contextual boundaries, for instance geographical and cultural ones. All-embracing concepts such as *mediatization*, which describes the interpenetration of society by media institutions as a sweeping societal meta-process (e.g., Krotz, 2009), cannot be assumed to be of analytic relevance in all locations, and there are contextual differences between North and South (interview with Tufte). Another relevant distinction expressed is the difference of scale between, for instance, the study of large media conglomerates and of small and local theatre companies, which demands a different set of questions and theories (interview with Reason). More generally, reflection is called for when investigating any new context and herewith cultural practice, even within one's presumably well-known geographical environment. In the interviews, such reflections were discussed in relation to studies of urban space, museums as experiential spaces, health care settings, learning environments, alternative media as well as social media sites (interviews with Tosoni, Bennett, Tucker, Tréré, Hasse).

Also academic practice itself varies in relation to the geopolitical context it takes place. In North America, audience research is closely related to the industry and its needs (interviews with Tréré and Bennett). For example, theatre and performance studies has followed the expansion of the creative industries that took a growing interest in their audiences, allowing academics to engage in applied research (interview with Bennett). As a result, there has not been much interest in North American academia for the sense-making activities of audiences, while this research is very much present on the other side of the Atlantic (Reason and Sedgman, 2015).

Furthermore, diverse conceptions of the audience are living side by side with other conceptions of the subject as they become relevant for studying particular contexts.

Audiences are often understood as a collection of individuals, but it appears important, for example in media literacy, to understand individuals in their social relationships, e.g. in their family context (interview with Livingstone). In science and technology studies, audiences have also been conceptualized as learners (Hasse) and users as co-producers (Tucker). More generally in audience research, a distinction is often made between audiences as citizens or consumers, and this distinction has oriented different kinds of audience research, for example in theatre and performance studies (interviews with Reason and Bennett). The notion of consumer, however, signals a passive context of media use, which is not seen as a fruitful starting point for the study of media literacy (interview with Livingstone). The importance of studying audiences as ordinary people, which has implications for how they come to learn about and engage in social problems via the media, was also underlined (interview with Buckingham). In addition, looking at ordinary citizens allows us to better understand connections between media uses and social change (interview with Tufte).

Research increasingly becomes sensitive to different implications of contextuality, which consequently influences methodological strategies. This is especially the case for science and technology studies, whose investigation demands a deeper understanding of the context of technology than what is usually provided by audience research, hence offering novel methodological paths for audience research, especially when it relates to the new media landscape (see Mathieu et al., this issue). In science and technology studies, it is common to combine verbal methodologies, such as the interview, with live observations, on-the-spot conversations and analyses of textual data such as online discussions (interviews with Tucker and Hasse). Depending on the object of study, the evaluation of the usability of existing methodological toolboxes varied among our interviewees: The value of trusting on existing, long-developed methodologies and the creativity of multidisciplinary research teams was emphasized (interview with Livingstone) just as much as the limits of existing methods, among others calling for experimenting with new data collection and analysis technology as well as artistic and site-specific methods in studying media-related routines and habituation (interview with Tosoni).

Concluding remarks

All interviewed scholars stressed the importance of the critical knowledge interest, which seems to define a core academic value. However, this critical interest is imbricated in complex considerations that are often embedded in context, also in complex (multidisciplinary) and normative contexts, some of which escaping the control of academic research. As a result, the critical sense appears more as a standard to preserve – in reflection, in distance and in the rigorous application of scientific methods – than an interest that invariably needs to shape all research projects. These are always the result of a shared relevance with the world outside academia, in which resources are used for other things than reflection, distance is not always possible or explicit, and time plays against rigor (interview with Tufte). While it is important to criticize, it is also important to see how our

questions and knowledge connect to the public at large (interview with Buckingham). Sometimes academic knowledge needs to be instrumentalized if it needs to be taken up by stakeholders (interview with Livingstone). The critical sense is always in the backstage of research practice, but its frontstage also needs to take other interests in consideration.

More than a critical interest, however, what is needed to advance audience research is reflexivity. Researchers need to explicitly ask themselves how they can contribute with valuable knowledge to public as well as academic debates (interview with Buckingham). Reflexivity is not always easy to achieve, especially when concepts, theories and methods that form our everyday repertoire, the raw material for our thinking, become a naturalised part of established research practices. While our meeting with different scholars provided us an occasion to reflect on the role that interdisciplinarity, normativity and contextuality play in research, similarly, this paper represents an invitation to engage more largely with these issues. We can take our research practice out of its social and habitual context (interview with Hasse), in which these constituents offer a background that provides a stable, perhaps even taken-for-granted, meaning to our repertoire, and insert it in a collective practice strongly dedicated to discussing explicitly these meanings under the light of interdisciplinarity, normativity and contextuality, in order to deliberately destabilise, question and rearticulate them.

Biographical notes:

David Mathieu is assistant professor at the Department of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University, Denmark. His current work focuses on audience and reception research, social media, research methodologies and social change communication, with an emphasis on the changing nature of audiencing in the age of social media. Contact: mathieu@ruc.dk.

Maria José Brites is assistant professor at the Lusophone University of Porto (ULP) and postdoctoral researcher at the Communication Sciences at Communication and Society Research Centre (CECS/UMinho). Her research interests include issues such as Youth, journalism and participation, Audience studies as well as News and civic literacy. She started the blog [ANLiteMedia](#) as a way to track these issues. Contact: britesmariajose@gmail.com.

Niklas A. Chimirri is assistant professor at Roskilde University's Department of People & Technology. His research centers on psychological, sociomaterial studies of technology, communication and design in everyday life. Currently he investigates young children's meaning-making through digital technology and develops participatory approaches to qualitative inquiry across age groups. Contact: chimirri@ruc.dk.

Minna Saariketo is doctoral researcher in the School of Communication, Media and Theatre at the University of Tampere, Finland. Her research concerns agency and algorithmic power in technologically mediated society with a special interest in developing the approach of critical technology education. Contact: Minna.Saariketo@staff.uta.fi.

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Note:

¹ Apart from the literature that is scattered throughout this paper, we can name as useful resources for the preparation of our interviews: Jensen, 2014; Evans & Stasi, 2014; Livingstone, 2012; Couldry, 2011; Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009; Rancière, 2009; Hermes, 2009; Höijer, 2008; Cover, 2006.