

Deconstruction of the audience concept

In addition to Raymond Williams, James Webster also contends that there are no masses but instead only ways of seeing people as masses. Virtually all audience studies need to conceptualize or operationalize audiences to a theoretical abstraction of one sort or another (e.g., audience as mass, outcome, agent, victim, consumer, commodity), because it is impossible, for instance methodologically, to objectively know all possible audiences (hence, “sampling” in both qualitative and quantitative research methods) at their highly complicated cognitive, behavioral, and social processes of interacting with the media and others (e.g., interaction with other human beings).

Some scholars, such as Martin Allor, Sonia Livingstone, and Ien Ang, have suggested that thus, we cannot understand media audiences without deconstructing the notion of, and the categories of, audience itself as an institutional, discursive construct. Livingstone, for instance, notes that there has been a crisis over the very concept of audience and advocates to rethink the usefulness of audience as an analytic category. In her view, instead of asking what the audiences really are as individuals or masses, we should reconceptualize them as a construct which addresses relations between people and media in various contexts at highly interlinked analytic levels. She brings forth the case of new media to make her argument. She contends that new media further complicate the audience concept as a stable, fixed notion. To her, audiences of new media are rather a moving target, slipping away from the classical theories of audiences. The premises with conventional mass media are challenged (generally new media are no longer simply mass communication, that is, they do not necessarily adopt the one-to-many model of communication). Instead, new media facilitate communication among peers (e.g., social networking sites such as Facebook where audiences or participants actively contribute to the

media content) and interaction with the production (e.g., reality television shows such as American Idol where audiences vote and make the very outcomes of the content). New media technologies place audiences' interpretive activities at the very center of media design and use. Livingstone questions then how far existing, conventional theories and methods of research audiences can be extended to new media environments and calls for significant rethinking of the audience concept.

Ang also, like Livingstone, emphasizes the discursive construct of audiences but stresses at the same time the importance of studying the social world of the actual audiences. To Webster, the assertions that either we completely abandon the notion of audience (upon the view that there are only ways of seeing people as masses due to methodological limitations, not the actual masses) or that we solely see the audiences as a discursive construct are too extremes. While he acknowledges that audience studies inevitably present a partial picture of the audiences, he contends that this does not necessarily mean that audiences are somehow unreal. There are real human beings out there who constitute audiences. To him, this is rather a confusion between a problem of epistemology and a problem of ontology. Audiences are imagined but at the same time they are real.

Various models of audience

Scholars, policy makers, and others have conceptualized various notions of audiences. James Webster, and Webster and Phalen provide us with a survey of basic audience models that are distinctive yet not exclusive (you will see that some models share similar languages in their description). Some models are scholarly efforts to theorize audiences (and in particular, media effect theories were built upon the premises of certain audience models) while others were

somewhat inconsistently used in history by broadcasters and policymakers for their particular policy debate goals. Each model of audience grants, and by extension leaves out, privileges for particular ways of thinking about the relations between people and the media. In the following, I will briefly discuss their surveys and what premises and privileges these models entail.

Webster discusses three basic models of audience. There can be other variances of audience models but generally they can be discussed upon these three models. The first model is to see audience as a mass. In this model, audiences are perceived as an imagined collection of people who are scattered around, act autonomously, and have little knowledge of and interaction with one another. They are common in the sense that they are exposed to certain media contents. The question that this model focuses on is: what media do people consume?

Secondly, Webster discusses audience as outcome model. This model views audiences as being acted upon by media. Implying James Carey's transmission model of communication where the focus is the movement of information or message (effect, in the case of media effects theories) from one point to another, the central question that this model concerns is: what do media do to people? This model has contributed to the development of various media effects theories and helped legitimize the field of communication because this theory generated and refined the models of communication and produced a body of literature when the field/discipline was emerging.

The third model is audience as agent model. In the 1970s, with growing cultural studies, there were interests in alternative ways of conceptualizing audiences. Instead of seeing people as passively acted upon by media, scholars began to theorize audiences as free agents actively choosing what kinds of media they consume, use media to better suit their needs, and make their own interpretations and meanings. The central question in this model is: "what do people do with

media?” perhaps best represented in the uses-and-gratification theories of media. Also cultural studies audience research, in an attempt to move away from the analysis of sole texts and to study people’s interpretations and meanings of the media and their life, has had a tendency to privilege this model of audience. A bulk of fandom studies where participants actively respond to the original media contents and create their versions (e.g., fans creating and continuing parallel stories of Star Trek in Henry Jenkin’s study of Star Trek fandom; or woman soap opera fans sharing interpersonal communication in Nancy Baym’s study of r.a.t.s., an online community; or more radical example of culture jamming in Pamela Whilson’s study where audiences actively interrupted the structure of CBS’s Big Brother 2000 by interacting with the participants of the show, who were not permitted to have any outside contact, because they did not like the plot) and meanings as they please may be upon this model of audience.

Critiques and debates over which model of the three above is to be favored evolve around the characteristics of viewing audiences as either passive (i.e., audience as outcome model) or active (i.e., audience as agent model) and the limitations of placing audiences at one end of the passive/active dichotomy spectrum. The main criticism of audience as outcome model is that there are no complete passive audiences, as the model may imply. Webster points out that only a corpse placed at a chair in front of a television set could be truly a member of passive audiences. On the same note, also there are no completely active audiences who are fully aware of why they do what they do with the media and who can constantly provide reliable reports of their uses and gratification of the media. This premise of full self-awareness provides very little room for the operation of the unconscious (for instance, sometimes I come home and turn television on, not necessarily paying attention to the contents or having any concrete purpose of having it on but

perhaps being habitual). Also such emphasis on passive/active dichotomy limits our studies to micro-level, keeping it difficult for us to see a larger social structure (macro-level of analysis).

Webster and Phalen also provide three models of audience, mainly in terms of their analysis of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) documents regarding debates over government regulations and policies on, in particular, television. These models are not necessarily models theorized by policymakers themselves in their debates (and probably they were not actively conscious of their choices in choosing a certain model over another because the same policy makers shift from one model to another in consistently at different times for their particular policy agendas), but rather models that Webster and Phalen, as scholars, categorize in their typology from analysis of the FCC documents. The first model is audience as victim model. The premises in this model are: audiences can be easily exposed to program contents that may not be in their own best interests; the media can cultivate people's desires for bad programs; and the public interest can be served by a regulation that limits such exposures to the bad programs and instead promotes exposure to good programs (e.g., local news, educational programs). In this model, policymakers' great concerns are children. Children have been perceived to be in a special category of people who are particularly vulnerable, more so than others, to potential harms (e.g., pornography, violence) of the media. Also implying the First Amendment that privileges a free marketplace of ideas, as a preferred mechanism for communication, this model concerns that media may deny people's access to good contents (and this would be an example of audiences being victimized). And this model considers that harms can occur when good media contents are available but underused by audiences. For instance, FCC viewed the exponential growth of cable as a potential threat because cable diverts audiences from local news—programs that are more directly related to audiences' life in their town.

The second model is audience as consumer model. This model views audiences as consumers who enter the marketplace and choose products that best suit their needs. The premises and elements of this model are: audiences are well-informed, rational, and know what they want; and the public interests can be best served by a media system that accordingly provides contents to the audiences that they want. Thus, this model privileges the free market model for communication and government deregulations.

And the third model is audience as commodity or coin of exchange. This model is possible only in commercial media, to be more specific advertise-supported media system, where audiences can be segmented by their consumption of media and sold to advertisers. This model justifies policies that constrain competition, for instance, to prevent economic injuries. In this model, the focus is to ensure the economic base of the media remains intact.

Sut Jhally and Bill Livant argue that audiences work for the networks when watching television. Audiences' work for the television networks produces surplus watching time. In this exchange, audiences get program contents. Here, Jhally and Livant reverse the metaphor of working (i.e., audiences deliberately working at their home by watching to be sold to advertisers, instead of media working to provide contents for audiences).

Crafting audience models for theory and research in context

In the end, I agree with Webster that no single theory of audience compasses all possible research goals and that there are actual audiences (or real human beings that constitute audiences) out there while we may not necessarily be able to capture all aspects of their life organized by media. Webster provides us with some suggestions for thinking about audiences for future scholars of audience studies; they are to explore the interdisciplinary potential of audience

studies; to ground the theories of audiences in actual empiricism; to abandon the false passive/active dichotomy of viewing audiences; and to generate alternative models that better suit our research (e.g., combining theories). One example is limited-effect model that combines both audience as outcome and audience as agent models. Another example Webster provides is to theorize audiences in terms of agency and structure. In this view, we are not forced to choose one extreme or the other but rather encouraged to exam the agency and the structure in relations and negotiations and their interplays. The structure can be an external constraint on audiences' actions, interpretations, and meaning-makings. While human beings are capable of acting freely, these choices do not come out of thin air but rather constituted. Audiences are situated within institutional and social structures that both shape and are shaped by their actions.

To be capable of crafting more context-sensitive model of audience (here I favor theories of audience grounded in empiricism), it is in order for audience studies scholars to learn about various models that others before them have argued for and against and to be mindful of their possibilities and limitations.