Introduction

Ranjana Das

University of Leicester

Rd207@le.ac.uk

Forthcoming in Communication Review 16 (1)

The idea for this special issue of The Communication Review, and indeed, the cross-generational workshop in Brussels in spring 2012 where these essays were first presented, was developed in a very similar (and on-going) cross-generational exchange between two researchers whose intellectual ‘coming of age’ happened at very different moments for the field of audience research. As every doctoral supervision contributed to a new argument in a cross-generational exchange between Sonia Livingstone and myself (Livingstone & Das, 2012) – I learnt about the histories of this exciting field at a time when audiences were changing, and discovered an exciting agenda of “recognizing, appreciating, and standing up for the contribution and interests of ordinary people in the digital, networked age”. While the one of us began her research at a moment when ‘active audiences’ occupied much academic attention, the other has begun her work at a time when it is neither sufficient nor satisfactory to speak of active audiences (alone) in the face of interactive communication. So, we both asked often, “how far back should one reach into the history of the field, to what effect, when is it time to let go, and what new analytic tools might instead be needed?” These questions paved the way for a meeting of three generations of audience researchers in Brussels in 2012 and the essays which follow all engage with these questions in one way or the other.
“It is in the workaday world of reading and writing and researching – inspired by predecessors and contemporaries – that we look over our own shoulders, sensing the presence of an ancestor, dimly discerned at first, who is cheering us on in the direction that we ourselves (so we think) have chosen. That is how we give birth to those whom we recognize as intellectual parents. And often, we find it worthwhile to get to know these parents better.”

(Katz et al., 2003: 2)

This special issue brings together audience researchers from three ‘contrasting yet perhaps parallel generations of media scholars’ (Livingstone & Das, 2012) as they reflect on the state of the field as they have seen it develop, the changing trajectories of research that accompany changing conditions of mediation, and – for those of us who are ‘coming of age’ as audience researchers today – the thoughts presented here demonstrate attempts to sense the presence of intellectual ancestors as Elihu Katz and his colleagues so eloquently describe above. Some attempt, in these essays, to sketch a biography of the field both by drawing a line connecting mass and interactive communication as well as by reiterating the complexities of converging opposing methodological and indeed epistemological traditions, some seek to identify the beginnings of a new paradigm in audience research where public participation in changing conditions of mediation occupies centre-stage, some re-iterate the unfinished tasks of responding to and participating in public discourses about audiences, while others use their first empirical projects with audiences and users as a lens with which to look back for resources within fifty years of a field.

For Denis Mc Quail, Sonia Livingstone and Tereza Pavlíčková – each speaking from three different generations of researchers, the key questions are prompted by the changing conditions of mediation and the conceptual and empirical challenges posed to audience researchers by the
advent of new media. And each addresses this differently. For McQuail, a re-telling of the field’s biography is a means towards exploring if indeed the convergent, yet fragmented, media environment today calls for a new paradigm in audience research where users cannot quite be theorised as audiences had been. McQuail hesitates to label this as a new paradigm for as he correctly identifies, there are substantial similarities in our questions about texts, contexts and interpretation (whether theorised as reception or use) between then and now. And yet – as Livingstone argues – the differences in these conditions of mediated communication have meant that the advent of interactive media have in many ways transformed the nature of public participation. Quite different from a simplistic (and indeed, flawed) celebration of the radically transformed participation of audiences in society as citizens, publics, or as Livingstone says, ‘people’, the questions that a new ‘participation paradigm’ (co-existing with, rather than displacing other paradigms) must ask are – “what modes of participation are afforded to people by the particular media and communication infrastructures which mediate social, cultural or political spheres of life? And, on the other hand, how do people engage with, accede to, negotiate or contest this as they explore and invent new ways of connecting with each other through and around media?” For Pavlíčková, the questions raised by networked, fragmented communication prompt a return to pre-broadcast times where meaning and interpretation were theorised much before the study of mediated communication as we know it, began. Drawing upon her own first empirical work, Pavlíčková returns to theorisation of the author and the reader within hermeneutic theory to identify resources with which we can theorise new media use.

None of these are easy pursuits in changing communicative conditions. The author-text-reader framework for instance, has received critique, if not for anything else, at least for its literary bias. And yet, as Lievrouw and Livingstone point out (2006), ‘users’ are not necessarily comfortable replacements for readers or audiences. Responding to Lull’s (1988) critique of doing away with
texts and readers altogether, Bennett (1996) asks why the term ‘audience’ is preferable instead. He says ‘the inquiries that are currently conducted…represent, or figure, their objects of studying in different ways: as audiences, readers, publics, receptants, interpreters, viewers, spectators or listeners. Whichever of these conceptions is chosen…will…affect how a particular inquiry is conducted: what it looks for, how it frames its object theoretically, what methods are used, how the results are represented, where and how those results are circulated, and to what effect’ (1996, p. 146). Contrasting the empirical reader of reception studies with the theoretically active reader of literary aesthetics, he points out that ‘if the provenance of the “determined active reader” has been largely sociological, that of the “indecipherably active reader” has been chiefly literary’ (p. 153). It is perhaps with some sense of desperation that he makes the point that the mutuality of the text-reader relationship is forever indecipherable as the literary reader is ‘one whose activity, while subject to an endless theoretical affirmation, is simultaneously unfathomable since neither the place of the reader that reads nor that of the text that is read is susceptible, even in principle, to a definite determination’ (p. 153).

It follows from this last, that leaving aside the not just semantic tussles between readers, audiences and users, any attempt to reach at an understanding of how meaning is made is a question of methodology and as applicable for mass mediated communication as it is for interactive, networked communication. Can we ever truly grasp interpretation, meaning making or even use (which, unlike reception, does leave some traces)? How are we to reach at this and what, in the process, will we have struggled with in terms of our relationships with those we research (and indeed, represent)? Martin Barker, Kim Schröder and Niklas Chimirri engage with these different aspects of methodology in their essays in this collection. An engagement with contrasts, grasped by the essays above with a focus on contrasting conditions of mediation, which must in some ways at least, be connected in scholarly reflection, is evident in Schröder’s account of the challenges of methodological differences and convergence. Reflecting the often contrasting ways
in which the history of the field is told – Schröder’s essay is the latest in a line of essays about the challenges of convergence in the field. ‘Old’ battle-lines between qualitative and quantitative traditions, reflecting deep-seated epistemological differences in the way researchers have approached audiences, are far from resolved, as Schröder argues. Stepping away from a desire to necessarily converge separate camps – an attempt which has over the past few decades sparked substantial disagreements in the field, Schröder calls for ‘complementarity and collaboration’. Key, in this suggestion is that it does not make convergence and the obliteration of methodological differences a requirement for progress. Instead, it proposes the establishment of rapports, bridges and connections, where the aim is dialogue. In contrast to Schröder’s focus on the divergences and convergences between traditions, Barker’s focus is on the dynamics of the micro where audience researchers repeatedly hit the field in search of new empirical knowledge. Barker calls for greater attention to be paid to the ethics of being in the field. His questions all point towards the question of trust in researcher-researched relations, and move the matter of ethics beyond and outside of the cursory ticking of boxes alone. Barker asks “to whose benefit – but therefore also to whose possible disadvantage – is our research being conducted? Who will have access to the research’s findings, in ways that will enable them to understand, evaluate and make use of it? Chimirri’s essay reflects on precisely these questions as he uses field notes from his experiences as a researcher in a kindergarten to figure out how our identities as researcher are necessarily intersected by many other identities. As he points out, extending Barker’s focus on the matter of trust between researcher and researched, - “We’ researchers are equal to ‘them” at least insofar as we are also participants and contributors to (an investigated) practice – and in that sense no different than the participants we wish to do research with.”

For David Buckingham, key today is a necessary engagement with not just conducting but representing audience research. As audience researchers are increasingly called on to inform policy,’ audiences’ travel elsewhere, to other fields of knowledge. Audiences are theorised as –
publics, linking media and communications research to democratic participation theory (see Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; see also Livingstone and Das, 2009), as citizens and consumers (e.g. Couldry et. al, 2007), as families and households (see Livingstone and Das, 2010) – and audiences are classified. How do we speak about these various formations to those in other fields, or to the world at large? For, if audience researchers do not speak about audiences, others will, and do – and often these representations are problematic. Buckingham’s essay addresses precisely this and underlines the responsibility of audience researchers to represent audiences appropriately in a world where they are still homogenized, infantilized and misrepresented in the media. Despina Chronaki’s essay, reporting from her own first project with young people’s experiences of pornography highlights these tensions – between the image of audiences in the public eye and the realities about audiences thrown up by, and often regrettably kept confined to academic research.

Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt speaks to the generation of audience researchers ‘coming of age’ today with the delightful metaphor of the ‘hill’. As young scholars seek to find their niche, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt returns to the question of novelty in audience research – raised by Mc Quail and Livingstone in this collection, in their discussions of convergent media and the challenges posed by this. In tracing the newness of new media and new interdisciplinarities for audience research, she notes appropriately that “the declaration of newness, the ‘never-been-done-before’ aspect of research, comes with focus on or a combination of many issues. So, where has audience studies found the new in recent times?” There are striking similarities between now and the many moments of newness that have gone before – consider the advent of any ‘new’ media, and as she cautions us - “innovation or newness is seen as a selling point for an article, rather than the need of true out of the box thinking”. And encouragingly, those coming of age as audience researchers today seem to be keeping this in mind in finding their niche. Like Pavlíčková who attempts to make sense of new media use with insights from hermeneutic
philosophy, Kevin Smets situates the rather contemporary grouping of the ‘diasporic audience’ within longer histories of studying race and ethnicity in communication and culture and reminds us of the necessity to step away from essentialising the diasporic audience.

Together, the essays in this issue aim to address a ‘frustration with our lack of ability to speak both in a cohesive manner to one another [...] and also to those in different fields apart from audience study, who might not share either our political or methodological predispositions’ (Press, 2006, p. 97). And, getting three generations of audience researchers together, offers one possible inroad into Press’s reminder above of speaking to one another, at least within the field.

References


