

DIGITAL AUDIENCES

(1) Why study digital audiences?

In his work on media advertising, Perez-Latre identifies the 'beginning of a paradigm shift' (2009: 34) in late 20th Century media production; away from analogue, broadcast media towards digital, 'narrowcast' media. In this 'post-Television age', (Carpo cited in Perez-Latre, 2009: 36) media consumption is increasingly:

- **Personalised.** Content is tailored towards individual taste and preference (such as Netflix or YouTube's recommended videos)
- **On-demand.** Rather than scheduled broadcasts, audience consume content as and when they desire.
- **Convergent.** Media texts of all formats (TV, radio, text) are consumed on one or two devices (laptop, mobile, 'Smart' TV).
- **Interactive.** Audiences can respond to producers and create content themselves.

'The move from "analogue" to "digital" spectatorship has brought with it a plethora of new terms that reflect the shifting and multi-faceted status of the viewing public. Identified as consumers and producers, individuals and collectives, and passive spectators and active users, the new "digital" audience is constituted by "**prosumers**" (Van Dijck, 2009), "**viewers**" (Harries, 2002), "**producers**" and "**co-creators**" (Bruns, cited in Van Dijck, 2009)'
(Kant, 2014: 38)

(2) Prosumption as empowerment

Prosumers have been critically celebrated as having **increased power** to produce content, participate as active users and set new terms of media engagement.

Prosumers are celebrated as fostering:

- Participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006)

- New forms of networked community (Rheingold, 1996)
- Informed public debate (Curran and Seaton, 2001)

'The old limitations of media have been radically reduced, with much of the power accruing to the former audience'
(Shirky, 2008: 12).

(3) Was the audience ever 'passive'? Counter arguments

Hall's work on *Encoding/Decoding* highlights that audiences have always played an active role in interpreting media texts. Rather than passively receiving texts from producers, all receivers use their pre-existing socio-cultural knowledge to 'decode' texts in **dominant, negotiated or oppositional** ways (Hall, [1980] 2009).

Williams argues that seeing individuals as a homogenous group (such as a mass or audience) imposes a form of uniformity on what was always a heterogeneous group of individuals. He states that 'there are no masses, only ways of seeing people as masses'. (1969, p.281)

In her work on 'Communicative Capitalism', Dean argues that supposedly 'participatory' web interaction does not work to empower digital audiences in a meaningful or democratic way. She argues instead that on the contemporary web 'a contribution need not be understood; it need only be repeated, reproduced, forwarded' (2008: 59).

(4) Prosumption as work: A digital labour approach

Scholars such as Cohen (2013), Andrejevic (2011) and van Dijck (2009) emphasise that prosumers do not just create content – they also **generate profit** for platforms that support user-generated content.

'The shift to the social, participatory web has become a virtual gold mine for corporations running up against the limits of the "old" mass advertising system'
(Cohen, 2013: 178).

'It is crucial to understand the new role of users as both **content providers** and **data providers**. Besides uploading content, users also willingly and unknowingly provide important information about their profile and behaviour to site owners and metadata aggregators... Metadata can be mined for various purposes, from targeted advertising to interface optimization'.

(Van Dijck 2009: 47).

By generating revenue, prosumption can therefore be considered a form of **digital labour**. As Andrejevic explains, 'there is nothing particularly new about the fact that individual consumers add value to cultural and material products. Why then describe such forms of work... as labor (work that generates value)? Precisely because of the ways in which commercial digital media capture the details of activity that once eluded systematic forms of value extraction in order to turn them into information commodities' (2011: 90).

(5) Critiquing the digital labour approach

Scholars such as Milner (2011) and Jarrett (2014) argue that the monetization of prosumer activities is not always exploitative. Milner for example argues that '[Facebook] employees are tasked with creating income streams that profit from its success. It does not follow, however, that because Facebook is a company, whatever anyone does with the website it produces is somehow intrinsically 'capitalist', 'neoliberal' or indeed 'corporate' (2011: 197).

Again focusing on Facebook, Jarrett proposes that though Facebook commodifies prosumer interactions, users still benefit from using the site. She states that 'the affective intensity associated with exchanges on Facebook does not lose its capacity to build and sustain rich social formations even if, later, it enters into the commodity circuit' (2014: 20).

Taking Facebook as a case study, what forms of user prosumption exist on Facebook? Referring to Facebook's Privacy Policy and 'Your Ad Preferences' page, how

might Facebook monetize users' interactions? How might notions of labour, knowledge, privacy and exploitation complicate prosumption on Facebook?

References and further reading:

- Andrejevic, M (2011), 'Social Network Exploitation' in Papacharissi, Z. (ed) *A Networked Self*, New York: Routledge.
- Bennet, J. (2008) 'Interfacing the nation: Remediating public service broadcasting in the digital television age'. *Convergence*, 14, 277–294.
- Cohen, N (2013) 'Commodifying free labor online: Social media, audiences, and advertising'. *The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Dean, J (2005) 'Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics' *Cultural Politics* 1/1, 51-7455.
- Jarrett, K. (2014) 'The Relevance of "Women's Work": Social Reproduction and Immaterial Labour in Digital Media', *Television and New Media*, 15 (1), 14-29.
- Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hall, S. ([1980] 2009) 'Encoding/ Decoding', *Media Studies: A Reader*, New York: New York University Press.
- Kant, T. (2014) 'Giving the "Viewer" a Voice?', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 58:3
- Milner, David, (2011) *Tales from Facebook*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pérez-Latre, F. (2009) 'Advertising fragmentation: the beginning of a new paradigm?' *The Advertising Handbook*. London: Routledge.
- Rheingold, H. (1996). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Massachusetts: MIT.
- Shirky, C (2008) *Here Comes Everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*, London: Penguin
- Van Dijck, J. (2009) 'Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content' *Media, Culture and Society*, 31 (1), pp41-58

Tanya Kant
(2017)

