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'Editorial Introduction - International audience research: continuing concerns and novel developments'

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Editorial Introduction

International audience research: continuing concerns and novel developments

Recently there has been a proliferation of texts, edited volumes, and essays on audience research that testifies to both the conceptual and empirical advances as well as the on-going debates in the field. These have been engendered by the continuing theoretical advances and by the refinement of research methodologies and areas of research focus, all of which have in turn, been promoted by debates within the field – almost, family quarrels – as well as by the influence of developments in other, cognate fields of enquiry, from anthropology to political philosophy to development studies. These influences have been particularly important in encouraging the emergence of cross-cultural studies of audiences. But while an increasing amount of the research has been emerging from most of the continents, much of the conversation and debate has appeared to be happening among those researchers working on projects that are mainly based in Europe and North America. This special issue on International Audience Research is an attempt to bring into the dialogue a range of work which engages with or challenges existing conceptual orthodoxies or make empirical advances in terms of novel methodologies or relatively under-explored audiences.

Advances in the field of audience enquiry have without question been inspired by the complex set of issues relating to debates on globalisation and the media. Concerns about nationalism and identity, the growing interest in mobility, hybridity, diasporas and the media, the adoption of new information and communication technologies within the domestic context, critical re-evaluations of cultural imperialism, the relatively new themes of transnational and/or cosmopolitan cultures, have all in one way or another contributed to significant changes in the central questions that motivate audience research, and have encouraged the emergence of theoretically sophisticated interventions grounded on empirical study.

The essays included in this special issue touch on and elaborate several of these developments. Shaun Moores presents an engaging account of what he refers to as 'a phenomenological investigation of media uses and environments', and constructs a conceptual framework based on phenomenological geography. While acknowledging its limitations, he finds that area of work a fruitful way of engaging with and examining the

quotidian use of the media, and the complex ways in which it relates to place and space, in particular in relation to transnational migration.

Moore's essay begins from a critical encounter with the work of David Seamon, and a sense of suspicion towards the role of the media which he identifies there. We are pleased to be able to publish along Moore's argument a reply by Seamon, who challenges the equation of physical and mediated worlds and restates his and others' arguments that increased availabilities of mediated experience (iPods as one example) do indeed undermine everyday social life.

Brazilian telenovelas are the main focus for Machado-Borges, whose contribution argues the case for extending research on this genre to include the question of how it is integrated into other genres and media, and how it resonates with everyday life in Brazil. Promoting the idea that telenovelas are 'dynamic cultural products' whose significance extends beyond television, he contends that ethnographic fieldwork on the reception of this media form should recognize it as being anchored in specific socio-cultural contexts and promote particular subject positions.

Montiel examines the role of television news in the political processes that audiences in contemporary Mexico are involved in. Can television news be construed as the main contributor to political information for concerned citizens? In what ways does it contribute to the maintenance of the public sphere in Mexico, and to the continuing exclusion of sections of its population? Montiel is especially interested in exploring how television news impacts on the political participation of Mexican housewives in the public sphere, and how socio-cultural factors such as gender, age, and economic and social positioning factor in the reception of television news by housewives in Mexico.

The transnational consumption and celebration of new Korean masculinity in Japan is the subject of Sun Jung's essay, in which she uses the notion of 'counter-coeval desire' to examine the specific Korean masculinity as represented by the star Bae Yong-Joon, and Japanese female fans' desire of that masculinity. She is interested in exploring the wider implications of fan behaviour, as for instance how it relates to transnational flows, cultural proximity, and the 'temporal difference between the two nations'.

Hirsjavi's essay reports on one aspect of a much larger project conducted by a research network across six Baltic countries. This project explored the role of literary fantasy in the lives of young people in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden, and the kinds of understanding and pleasure different kinds of young people derive from this kind of writing, as a route into conceiving 'other cultures'. Hirsjavi discusses in particular one experiment in which young people were asked to report their responses of a story by Ursula Le Guin. Some unexpected results emerged about who was most able to engage with the story, and its presentation of an imaginary 'other'.

Harindranath's essay is a preliminary attempt to construct a conceptual framework that reformulates the issue of media, citizenship and democracy in order to bring into the

equation audience research. Basing his observations on existing analyses of mediated public knowledge in contemporary liberalised economies, he constructs a theoretical edifice which includes concerns regarding the consumer-citizen, the contributions of philosophical hermeneutics to the theory of the public sphere as well as to a clearer understanding of audience's engagement with mediated knowledge, and the importance of examining unequal distributions of cultural resources. The productive notion of deliberative or participatory democracy should include, he argues, the complex ways in which differences in access to cultural capital influence the audience-public's interpretation of media discourse.

While Harindranath's essay is predominantly theoretical, Egan and Barker's contribution focuses mainly on the empirical, presenting an absorbing and honest account of the problems and possibilities of multinational, cross-cultural research. It proffers an instructive narrative that elaborates on the challenges and excitement the writers encountered during the course of their cross-national collaborative study of *Lord of the Rings*. It includes the examination of the risks and rewards of using specific methods of data collection and analysis, as well as the difficulties and promises inherent in such a large collaborative venture involving researchers from several countries.

The essays in this issue therefore, provide valuable insights into international audience research. They explore innovative and productive theoretical directions, examine new areas of research, and supply novel data that allow for conceptual refinement. In some ways this special issue of *Particip@tions* is also a political project, in the sense that the essays have attempted to build on and go beyond existing frames and domains of enquiry by attending to developments and concerns relating to contemporary societies outside Europe and America, thereby contributing towards pushing the field of audience research in new directions.

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