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Reimagining audiences, reimagining engagement

Abstract:

The chapter looks at the history of audience studies in order to reflect on the datafication turn that is exciting both researchers and practitioners worldwide. By distinguishing six stages in audience research, we discuss what we know of audiences and what we have considered important to study about audiences has changed over time. Now that there is an increasing amount of digital data tracking different aspects of audience actions, there is a sense that we know now more than ever before. However, the argument of the following discussion through the historical phases of audience studies is that we know less than we care to admit.

Datafication is seldom connected to the ideas of what kind of questions can we ask about audiences and what the data is actually indicative of. What is collected is not always suitable in answering the questions we might have about the audiences, despite our excitement about the opportunities that the data provides in understanding audiences.

Keywords: Audiences, media effects, reception, media engagement, datafication, participation

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1. Introduction

This chapter aims to look back on audience studies, reflect on questions we have asked in different phases about audiences and contemplate how these questions can or cannot be answered through data coming from the quantification of audiences in the process called datafication. We argue that there are six different stages in audience research, some of which are also called paradigms (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; McQuail, 2013; Livingstone, 2013), based on the idea that in each phase there is a shift in focus on what is it about audiences that matters and what is worth studying. We argue that six different approaches can be identified. Though all six approaches have gone through some evolution in their own right, they are all still actively used to make sense of audiences today.

The reason these reflections are particularly important today is the global phenomena called datafication. People consume media, and read, watch or listen to texts. They give reactions

(likes, etc.) and comment on and share texts. All these actions are transformed and kept as data that can be analysed. The term datafication was originally coined by Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger (2013) to mean the transformation of social action into online quantified data, thus allowing for real-time tracking and predictive analysis. Though datafication impacts diverse aspects of our lives differently, in this article we would like to focus on a specific kind of data and related analytics, namely datafication which happens in different layers of the media-making process where audiences are reduced to their data footprint, and assessments about audience actions and impacts are made based on these limited footprints. Groot Komerlink and Costera Meijer argue, “Scholars and news professionals have tended to take metrics at face value by assuming a close correspondence between clicks and audience interests” (2018, p. 669). Understandings of audiences are often reduced to limited metrics, thus leading to wrong assumptions about their interests and behaviour.

The key data that are used to indicate audience activity is clicks, views and comments. Additionally, especially in the context of cross-media production, traffic source, device, visitor frequency, engagement minutes, page views and average engaged time are also considered. In the context of Facebook, as an example of a social media platform for content creation, the main metrics gathered about the audiences are the following: reach, engagement, views, previews, likes, mentions and recommendations. Facebook also provides data about gender, age and location-based division of the page followers, fans and people reached. These are the basic categories from the Facebook page insights. Furthermore, we looked at Google Analytics as one of the more popular tools for understanding website visitors, which, in addition to what is mentioned above, has information about the interest category.

Data, especially from Facebook and Google, is collected in a non-transparent manner. It is difficult to know who is included and how. However, the aim of this text is not to problematise the quality and methodological transparency of the data collected. Rather, we aim to look at how this data fits with the understanding of existing audience analysis. Discussing this poses the problem that, at least in case of Facebook Insights and Google Analytics, the focus is on marketing and hence, paradigmatically speaking, a different understanding of and underlying assumptions related to people who could be considered audiences. At the same time, in today’s world of digital content generation and distribution, these indicators become the basic assumptions of who is the audience and what they do.

The first aim of this chapter is to look at how our understanding of audiences and audience activity has evolved through different phases. The second aim is to discuss how datafication changes possibilities and ways of audience research in these phases and their different conceptualisations of audiences.

2. Phases of audience research

While McQuail (2013) identifies paradigm shifts in audience studies – noting a movement from linear models to circular or networked, including the erasure of clear distinctions between senders and receivers – he also argues that the old paradigm is not eradicated. Jensen and Rosengren (1990) identify five research traditions: (1) effects research, (2) uses and gratifications research, (3) literary criticism, (4) cultural studies and (5) reception analysis. While acknowledging the roots of audience studies, especially the ideas related to the incorporation/resistance paradigm identified by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), we consider literary criticism and cultural studies – because of their relative distance from the audiences – peripheral for the current discussion,

Inspired by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), Livingstone (2013) identifies four paradigms, each of which she considers active and useful, the latter depending on the focus of the research. These four are (1) behavioural, including effects and uses and gratification; (2) audience reception and media, or incorporation/resistance paradigm; (3) spectacle/performance paradigm; and (4) participatory paradigm. In discussing which questions are considered important and relevant, we disagree with the collation of effects and uses and gratifications paradigm. Rather, we see these should be considered separately since the questions for each of these paradigms are still crucially different and both approaches are in active use.

Schrøder (2018) divides the phases from a different angle, as he looks at reception studies focused on mediated democracies in five stages: hegemonic citizenship, monitorial citizenship, popular citizenship, participatory citizenship and ubiquitous citizenship. He sees reception studies at a crossroads with a potential to fertilise new areas of research. His division indicates the blurred boundaries of the different approaches: the popular citizenship

phase has strong overlaps with the spectacle/performance paradigm from Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) and the participatory citizenship stage gets its own label as a participatory paradigm from Livingstone (2013). Inspired by Schrøder (2018) and others (Hill, 2018; Nani, 2018; Ytre-Arne & Das, 2018), we pick up on the issue of being at a crossroads and propose a new phase: media engagement. This phase has commonalities with the ubiquitous citizenship stage from Schrøder; but because of the shifted focus in question, it warrants to be a new phase in its own right.

Hence, we argue that audience studies has experienced six major phases, namely (1) media effects, (2) uses and gratifications, (3) reception, (4) spectacle/performance (5) participation and (6) media engagement, all of which can be considered important and relevant questions to ask in the research context. These questions have been influenced not only by the ontological and epistemological background of the researchers but also by the shifts and changes in the surrounding environment. In the following section, we will briefly discuss each of the six phases and relate them to the datafication issues, exploring what kind of answers data can give us in the context of the related media audience question. It is important to note that these phases must be considered relative with blurry borders; but while many researchers might not agree to the details of classification, the idea of shifting focus within the audience studies is what we primarily want to exemplify here.

3. Six phases of audience studies

3.1 Media effects - what does media do to people?

In general, media research traditionally sees media effects as the first audience-related research paradigm. The paradigm is focused on the question: What does media do to people? This question emanates from the interest of media corporations and advertisers. The assumption of this paradigm is related to the idea that exposure to the media has to have an effect on people, and the challenge is to capture that effect, or, in the simpler forms, count the exposed groups and assume effects based on the exposure. The nature and direction of the effects are then a matter of content design and analysis. The audiences in this paradigm are subjects of manipulation. These assumptions of effects have led to discussions of moral panic, renewed by each next new media. Thus the fear of the deleterious media effect – especially to

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those supposedly weak minds, such as children, women, and uneducated people – has accompanied the introduction of film, comics, TV and video (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990).

Recently, this also includes digital media, as summarised by Livingstone (2018, p. 2):

In today’s heady climate of media panics—over so-called fake news, election hacking, Internet and smartphone addiction, the algorithmic amplification of hate speech, viral scams, filter bubbles and echo chambers, discriminatory data profiling and data breaches, the crisis in quality journalism, the demise of face-to-face conversation, and a host of digital anxieties about youth—fears about audience gullibility, ignorance, and exploitation are again heightened in popular and academic debate.

Using social science methodology, effect studies predominantly use structured and standardised techniques to collect and analyse data. There has been a great variety of research methods, including mostly experimental research (laboratory, field and natural experiments) and survey studies (questionnaires, standardised interviews). Often research techniques are combined, and studies are carried out over a longer period to get a more holistic perspective (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990).

As the data about the audience are mostly about views (minutes spent on sites and likes and comments), the data suits the effects paradigm. While remaining critical when trusting the data, the underlying positivist and empiricist assumptions of datafication fit the ideals of effects studies well. The problem is that while data about the audiences often measure clicks or views, it also assumes reading or looking. As a measure, the large-scale data automatically collected by the media industry are likely to be more accurate than the survey method for audience measurements. However, there are still major issues to overcome before even the basic assumption about viewing, reading or listening can be accurately made. Though the problem is not new, the promise of the new measurement methods and more data about ‘everyone’ (also data with more nuance about single viewing time) can make it more difficult to remember the challenges related to the assumptions of effects studies.

3.2 Uses and gratifications - What do people do with the media?

As a reaction to the effects paradigm, uses and gratifications (U&G) emerges as a counter stance, considering the uses made by the audience of media messages. According to Katz,

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Blumler and Gurevitch (1974), [t]he approach, which has, its origins in the USA in the 1940’s emphasizes (1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones (in Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998, p. 20). This paradigm underlines the idea that audiences are active media selectors; and in linking their needs and gratifications, media is seen to be one of many sources where the needs can be fulfilled, and audiences choose between media-related activities and other things in their lives with the potential to fulfil the same needs. The behavioural paradigm relies on the self-reporting of the motives and attempts to suspend the value judgements (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998).

While U&G shares a number of the same social sciences methods as the effects studies, the main difference is that the U&G is more open towards less structured and ‘naturalistic’ techniques like in-depth interviews and participant observations. The attempts to add validity to the studies by using multi-method approaches – a combination of cross-sectional and longitudinal data and attempts to get as holistic a perspective as possible – are also considered to be characteristic of U&G methods as an important aspect has been to distinguish between individual and structural components of the media use (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990).

While uses and gratifications has been criticised from different angles, the main problem identified by earlier research is that the researchers focus on the individual needs and functions and rely on self-reporting. Such research focus is sometimes considered superficial. The research on uses and gratifications of the digital media is still being conducted, as the matured typologies and relatively easy (even if superficial) operationalisation make it very attractive. Thus survey-studies about U&G of different internet sites or social media platforms are still published (e.g. Whiting & Williams, 2013; Dolan, Conduit, Fahy & Goodman, 2016). Though there is an increasing amount of data about audiences’ choices in the digital media, which rely on log data rather than self-reporting, there are new methodological problems related to that.

Clicks as indicators of interest fall nicely under the paradigmatic understanding of audiences as active selectors of the media messages. Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer (2018)

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provide an interesting critique as to why we cannot consider clicks as good measures of interest. In their interviews, they considered why people clicked or did not click on news items; and while their cognitive and affective categories had strong resonance with news values or uses and gratifications ideas as to why people read news, they also indicated dualism, where the same kind of news item descriptions received opposite reactions from the audience. However, the pragmatic category identified by Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer (2018) indicated that not clicking would often have nothing to do with the content, but the pragmatics of the surroundings (for example, not clicking on video because of being on the move or not clicking on an important news item due to limited time). Similarly, observations of user practices can indicate following news through updates even if the news item is never actually clicked or opened (and thus the interest is not registered in the data collection), thereby leading the researchers to conclude that while clicks are not meaningless, they capture only a limited amount of user interests.

3.3 Reception - How do people make sense of media?

Reception paradigm, or incorporation/resistance paradigm, comes from the ideas of cultural studies and literary studies. It is supported by the origins of cultural studies as well as the focus on the text by literary studies. Reception studies is sometimes considered to have begun with Morely's *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and decoding* (1980), where he showed that people positioned themselves towards the text not only based on their individual characteristics, but also that the interpretation was related to their socio-economic standing and positioning in the society. Others consider this as an example of cultural studies inspired research, not yet part of the reception studies paradigm (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). Despite which classification we adhere to, the idea of a study that incorporates text and audiences in the same analysis and brings together different empirical positions is considered to be part of reception studies ideas.

The problem that reception studies focuses on is whether the audiences are incorporating or resisting the dominant ideologies encoded in the texts. Depending on the position of the researchers, this means that the audiences can be considered as captives of the text – Dominant Text position – or audiences can be considered as having more autonomy, that is, the Dominant Audience position (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p.18). There are also in-

between positions, where the interpretation is seen to be a struggle and site of negotiation between two semi-powerful sources (Livingstone, 1990).

Reception studies comes from a more humanistic angle, and the most common research method is a comparative analysis of audience discourse and media discourse to examine the process of reception. When the research is done from the text dominant position, the increasingly complex approaches to text analysis are often the starting point. The audience data is usually collected through small-scale empirical studies containing in-depth interviews and observations of the participants. This data is then compared through qualitative methods with media content data. Important factors in this analysis are the social context and the cultural and political background of the audience. A critique of reception studies is the lack of replicability and generalizability, which sets it apart from both media effects and uses and gratification studies (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) also criticise the paradigm that despite the attempts to in-depth context-sensitive approaches, the ethnographies conducted in the framework of this paradigm still lack the promised awareness of the surrounding context of the audiences. As an example of a theoretically grounded reception study, Michelle (2007) has written a detailed overview of reception studies and summarised it into the composite model of reception: transparent, referential, mediated and discursive modes of reception, tested and also discussed in Davis and Michelle (2011) and Michelle, Davis and Vladica (2012). The later study demonstrates well the use of cross-national comparative analysis aided by Q-methodology, where qualitative and quantitative research meet analysis of a concrete text.

We agree with Livingstone and Das’ assertion that, “now that people make visible their role in the (re)production of meaning by searching, clicking, typing, moving, and merging text, the activity of the audience can surely no longer be in doubt” (2013, p.13). However, we claim that when it comes to an understanding the process of reception, there is no quantified audience data that can give us insights about how the audience made sense of a media text and if it incorporated or resisted the encoded ideologies. While we can see traces of some audiences using and re-making media texts in the digital space, it would be wrong to assume that this is the only reflection of the reception process. Despite all possibilities through datafication, there is still no other way into the minds of the audience than to talk to them and ask them about the reception. And if there would be any data that could give us clues about

how media texts are perceived, the problem concerning the lack of the surrounding context would still remain.

3.4 Spectacle/Performance - How are audiences part of media?

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) are the first to discuss and label a group of studies to be called spectacle/performance paradigm. They argue that a new way of thinking about audiences was needed to adapt to the changes of society, which impacted the nature and experience of being an audience. Moreover, they claim that in the 1990s being an audience started to be visible beyond previously contained specific events of audiencing and being an audience became a mundane event, a part of everyday life and identity construction. While the struggle of meaning-making from reception studies remains, the research focuses on the identity and practice of being an audience. To clarify this, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) discuss three types of audience: simple, the mass audience and the diffused audience. The first is the audience of, for example, a theatre piece where all the members of the audience are present at the same time at the same place. The mass audience is the audience of mass communication medium or production, often considered standardised, commercialised and impacted (as discussed in effects paradigm, for instance). The diffused audience denotes the idea that in contemporary society everyone becomes an audience all the time and media becomes part of our sense of security, familiar routines and rituals.

The name spectacle/performance also highlights when the mediascapes are an integrated part of identity construction and everyday life the mundane activities can become a performance for the imagined media moments. While Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) discuss this mostly in the context of traditional media, the change towards social media – and what Castells (2009) calls ‘mass self-broadcasting’ – has surged after the publication of their book. This means that a lot of attention on audiences, users and producers of the digital media have even made people question whether the concept of audiences is still valid (see discussion in Livingstone & Das, 2009). Goffman’s work on the presentation of the self (1969) has been a key source of inspiration for many researchers studying performativity on social media (for example, Hogan 2010, Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015).

Another social change that Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) observe is related to commodification as aestheticisation, which in return means that audiences become markets, and markets are constructed as audiences so that consuming is like being a member of a diffused audience (p. 97). This relates to the idea that commercial marketing data is used as an indicator of audiences, and the concepts get blurred in media organisations as well as on other platforms. At the same time, it serves as a critical reminder: Should we accept this kind of conflation of marketing data and the ideas of audiences?

The media saturation of everyday life and its consequences relate strongly also to the ideas of mediatization. Though the discussion of the complex phenomena is beyond the scope of this paper, the observations about the shifting role of the audience have been observed in several different works (for instance, Hjarvard, 2013; Deuze, 2014; Passoth, Sutter & Wehner, 2014). The idea, however, that being an audience is a process that has mutual consequences to people's everyday lives, as well as the media products, is already discussed in Fiske's classic text about audiencing (1992).

As the audiences in this paradigm need to be located in the complex patterns and rhythms of contemporary everyday life, there is a tendency to prioritise ethnography inspired methods. Abercrombie and Longhurst stress the following: “This does not rule out focus group discussions, surveys or interviews, but recognises that these can only be used adequately once they have been contextualised in everyday life” (1998, p. 161). They also argue that the studies in this paradigm do not reject text analysis, but prioritise other modes over it. At the same time, especially when it comes to social media analysis, texts produced by the users are central to the understanding of performative aspects.

In the boom of user-generated content, an indicator of the performative aspects of audiencing within everyday lives of the people the argument of blurred boundaries between users and producers can be more convincing than ever (van Dijk, 2009). Bruns (2007) coins the term produsage, indicating a new type of user-led content production which collaborative and continuously building and extending existing content. The blurred boundaries between the users and producers, broken down role divisions and hierarchies led to the optimistic hype of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), which will be considered more in the next paradigmatic section. However, as argued above, the blurred boundaries of the different approaches make it

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difficult to distinguish between these phases, but we argue that the focus of the analysis is still distinctly different. In the spectacle/performance paradigm, the interest is on self-construction, identity building; in the next section, the focus is on participation in social and political life. The user-generated content on social media can be either, and there is research aplenty for both aspects.

Datafication of audiences impacts this paradigm greatly. The idea of audience spectating and performing leads to a good connection with the discussions of datafication. As every view, comment and post is carefully recorded, there is easily an illusion of capturing audience experiences through data. However, the main challenge is that with the limited data available through the datafication of audiences, the deep embeddedness into the everyday life and diffused nature of audiencing gets lost. The importance of context and relevance of social dimensions of audiencing processes becomes reduced to a limited amount of data. One can, of course, argue that with increasing dataveillance (van Dijik, 2017) and cross-platform data use the context is more traceable than ever; but as the paradigm stresses the non-media parts of the experiences as crucial, then offline aspects of audiencing remain uncaptured.

3.5 Participation - How do audiences use media to be part of society?

The new affordances of networked digital media lead to a participation enthusiasm among media scholars and society. Jenkins (2006) proclaims a participatory culture where audiences are seen as active and creative participants, rather than consumers or a receptive audience that is making use of the chances that are offered by the new tools. He sees the boundaries between professional content producers and consumers blurring, and he speaks of democratisation of media use. This participation hype also leads to a shifting focus of audience researchers towards participation in society through media. Consequently, Livingstone (2013) proposes a participation paradigm as an addition to Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) classification of three paradigms.

Participation means to take part in something. Since Livingstone sees participation as not happening “merely for the sake of it” (2013, p.24) but driven by interests, she draws a close connection to what the audience is participating in culture, community, civil society or

democracy. She argues that the importance and desire to participate are not necessarily higher, as digital media provides new possibilities for expression and deliberation, thus heightening the visibility of the participation agenda. Carpentier (2012) questions the participation hype of web 2.0, as it often lacks the real power-shifting nature of participation. Livingstone (2013) also stresses the normative dimension of participation, as it needs to be perceived as beneficial by society.

The changing media environment increases the opportunity for people to visibly participate in society by creating content, sharing other people's content, commenting, discussing, and simply liking or reacting to media texts or following a distributor. These actions are all leaving data traces that can be examined and analysed, which in turn leads to a rich collection of data to search for answers on how audiences use media to participate in society. Focusing on available data, it is often forgotten though that it is only data about some of the audiences and some kinds of participation. Not everyone is using the affordances of digital media and is producing content, or even sharing or reacting to it. Another important question in this context is how an act of participation can be operationalised. Not all content creation or participatory action is also an act of citizenship and therefore, participation. Rather, some content creation should be seen as small acts of engagement (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2018) and more in line with identity creation. Differentiating between these actions through quantified data is currently challenging. One can also argue that by focusing on user-generated content we are looking at digital production practices, but still not understanding audiencing.

An additional limiting factor of using big data is access to relevant data. To simplify and operationalise the research and define the object of study, many researchers do 'snapshot-based' studies that only provide data from a certain point of time and source; these are limiting, especially concerning insights of developments (Larsson, 2017, p.439). Text-based audience participation studies often assume a comprehensive understanding of reality. This is problematic when relying on automated data collection mechanisms, which are provided by commercial platforms like Twitter. Moreover, focusing on participation in one kind of media makes research media-centric and ignores participatory behaviour of non-media users and non-active audiences.

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Studies about the so-called clicktivism or slacktivism (Mozorov, 2009), investigate audience actions like reacting to content, signing an online petition or demonstrating solidarity in other ways from the viewpoint of political participation. Contrary to optimistic expectations, analysis shows that the actions of the audience merely represent a low engagement and serve the main purpose of “making the Internet users feel good about themselves, while avoiding a ‘real’ involvement which might be more demanding in terms of time and effort” (Mazak & Stetka, 2016, p. 126).

Looking at user-generated content or quantified data only leads to limited results that do not allow for the holistic interpretation. As mentioned before, the context of an act of participation is indispensable for the determination and assessment of the action. Reviewing the legitimacy of clicktivism, Halupka proposes, for example, a series of lenses to assess the theoretical boundaries of emerging actions like clicktivism, which are “the adherence of the action to tradition avenues; the acceptance of the action, and belief in that action; and, the intentionality of the action, and the context in which it is situated” (2018, p.130). Big data today is unable to provide data for all these lenses.

3.6 Media Engagement - How do people relate to media, how do people engage with media?

To study audiences today and capture the complexity of the audiences’ actions, reception and sense-making in a ubiquitous mediated networked environment, we need concepts that do justice to this complexity. We need to move beyond a single media text, a single medium, beyond the moment of attention (Hill, 2017), reception (Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015) and participation to focus on the whole audience experience in the context of a mediated environment with its diverse connections and relationships. And we, among others, see media engagement due to its multidimensionality as a suitable concept for a task like this. Hill, for example, proposes a term “spectrum of engagement” to mean “a concept that captures the multidimensionality of engagement within industry settings and reception contexts, pushing the meaning of the term beyond audience attention and ratings metrics where there is a primary focus on economic value, to also include the social and cultural values of engagement” (2017, p. 2). Corner, who claims that engagement “can help us understand and debate the different types of connectedness which our relationships with media systems

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involve,” (2017, p. 1) sees engagement in different stages with varying intensities, including attention engagement (looking, listening and processing significations) and involvement engagement (occurrence of deeper cognitive and affective interaction between media product and audience). Engagement can be understood through three dimensions: internal (sense-making) and external (clicking, reacting, posting, etc.), activeness and the social environment (Meyer zu Hörste & Vanderbeke, 2018).

The notion of media engagement is especially relevant and important when it comes to the discussion of cross-media environments, where the single story can be received across different platforms, and it is the interaction with the broader media environment that becomes more relevant. Hill sees engagement studies as advancement to several of the above-discussed phases: “research into how we experience media content, artefacts and events, from our experience of live performances, to social media engagement, or participation in media itself. Media engagement explores the disperse connections across industry contexts, cultural forms, and audience experiences” (2018, p. 6). Connected to the cross-platform idea, Nani explores how affordances and invitations to engagement need to be understood beyond media texts and include also looking at the medium, production teams and information sources (Nani, 2018).

In contrast to the spectacle/performance paradigm, media engagement research focuses less on the identity but more on the practice and lived experience of the audiences and the connections and context of the environment. Engagement studies are inspired mostly by qualitative studies, yet they also recognise the limitations of these and have worked to overcome them with a combination of qualitative and quantitative studies. Most remarkable are, perhaps, Q-methodology-based studies, introduced already in reception studies phase. Davis and Michelle (2012) discuss the use of Q-methodology in audience studies; and while they apply it to a classical reception study of the film *Avatar* as a text, there are also applications where the method is used in a more engagement studies manner. Schrøder (2015) implements the method in investigating engagement with different news sources, and Courtois and Schrøder (2014) explore the method also for international comparative studies. Davis and Michelle explain, “In a Q Methodological study, respondents rank-order a set of items (usually from two to five dozen statements on cards, but images, objects, or other stimuli such as sounds or odors can also be sorted) into a configuration that is taken to represent a holistic expression of each person’s perspective, such as degree of agreement with,

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or preference for, the items” (2011, p. 530). This sorting is then analysed using factor analysis and resulting factors interpreted with the help of qualitative comments gathered from the discussion process. Thus, the Q-methodology provides an interesting and valuable tool for audience studies as it allows capturing the human subjectivity with quantifiable tools. The ideal of complementing qualitative and quantitative data through mixed methods makes a combination of large-scale log data with interviews, observations or other qualitative methods well-adapted to engagement studies.

Engagement seen from different perspectives has different connections to the datafication of audiences. The industry sees engagement as a measurement of performance and an indicator of audience interest, which is easily quantifiable and recorded through digital and social media analytics, ratings or reviews (Hill & Steemers, 2017). The goal, not just for the industry but also for private content producers, is to have a high engagement time and engagement activity (clicks, reactions, shares, comments) on their content. However, as Hill and Steemers argue from an audience researcher perspective, “engagement is so much more than the public’s interest in something” (2017, p.1).

Engagement goes beyond the activity that is collected and shown in the data. It includes the experience and sense-making of the text, the medium, the media environment and the context of the situation. As Schröder states, “tracking-data about digital media use has little value if not contextualized by qualitative contextual insights” (2018, p. 2). What analytical data sources are declaring at the moment as engagement is exposure time and external activity of the audiences without any social or environmental context or connection to internal activity. Thus it only provides insights about the industry’s definition of engagement used for the purpose of economic value. It does not give us information about the audiences’ experience and sense-making across their mediated lifeworlds, thus no insights into social and cultural values. To gain these insights, the log data has to be complemented by qualitative research methods by adding the dimensions of social and environmental context and sense-making.

4. Conclusion

The discussion of the datafication of audiences shows that with all the available data we tend to forget how and for which purpose the available data is/has been collected or by whom. It is

not the researchers (or even sometimes media producers) themselves who establish what questions they have, what data they need and then collect and use. It is commercial corporations that collect the data with the purpose of making money and predicting the future (Athique, 2018). Thus, with increasing datafication, sometimes things are turned upside down. In the past, there was the thought of which data is needed first, and then the data was collected. However, today the available data comes first, and then the thought how it can be used and analysed follows, sometimes leading to the drawing of mistaken conclusions based on the data of others.

We conclude with the words of Livingstone and Das: “Research once again risks celebrating an excessive notion of agency. It still struggles to keep in its sights both users’ engagement with texts on the screen and the real-world social contexts that shape that engagement. And we are witnessing the inadvertent return of the singular, closed authoritative text (and text analyst), forgetting the insight that texts (online and offline) are subtly open to multiple interpretations and leave gaps for users to fill, preferring instead readings that shape users’ responses (Burbules 1998)” (2013, p. 10). The lure of the digital space where the traces of the audiences have become even more visible, massive and real-time is definitely there. After examining the phases of audience research and looking at the datafication data available for each kind of question, we can still conclude that it is not enough. Even if we could argue that some of the audience related data can be more precise and detailed through combining different sources, and aggregating different types of data, it is still unclear if the result would provide the ability to look at the text and the people at the same time.

With the potential aggregation of big data from different sources, the question about the cost of it to society also needs to be regarded. Considering the ubiquity of the media, the dataveillance (van Djick, 2014) and algorithmic compilation of different types of data across different sources, we doubt that the costs of understanding audiences in such a nuanced and detailed manner would be acceptable. Cameras that would monitor our eyes in attempts to see if they really follow and focus, electrodes attempting to measure the brain reactions to the sent messages or genetic analysis to understand the degree of the gullibility of the individuals are sometimes unnervingly close. But as we have demonstrated above, it is important to remember what kind of question your data answers: Would reading facial expressions help to understand gratifications or reception or engagement?

With every changing text, every changing reader and every changing context, the decisive conclusions and predictions that would allow to capture the audiences is, in our opinion, still out of reach. These ideas of ideal measurements follow the ideals of empiricism, where everything worth measuring will also be measured, and those ideas are compatible with only some of the questions about the audiences. At the same time, other paradigms discussed above are more likely to consider other questions about audiences to be more relevant, and thus can easily agree that what they need to know about audiences cannot and (at least in the current situation) should not be datafied.

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