Mobile Audiences

Methodological Problems and New Perspectives in Audience Studies

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CMCS Working Papers
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Thanks to David Forgacs,
for his books and, above all, for his friendship
1. The Italian Road to Audience Studies: an Introduction

In the mid 1960s Italian Audience Studies were part of the rising discipline of media sociology, and sociology itself was finding it hard to take off in Italy, at least in the academic world. Sociological studies were legitimated thanks to two tendencies: on the one hand the social movements that led up to and followed on from 1968 and on the other the impact of other disciplines like psychology and anthropology. Sociology - and in particular media sociology - was placed initially in the furrows of the American tradition of communication research. In this context, it is not surprising that many scholars, including some Marxist scholars, adopted a theoretical system that derived from structural-functionalism and for this reason, many methods and concepts coming from communication research were adopted by Italian communication scholars. It is no accident that in Italian handbooks of media sociology, at least until the beginning of the 1980s, the prevailing direction was the functionalist approach and the main reference points were Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz. So it’s not surprising that the best handbook of the new Italian media studies also gave a prominent place to the problem of media effects and steered frequently towards the field of effects theories.

A particular case is represented by audience studies, where a curious convergence was produced by two factors: on the one hand the influence of the Frankfurt School on the

\[ \text{1 Some parts of this first paragraph are taken from De Blasio and Sorice 2007.} \]

\[ \text{2 About the conceptual and research problems posed by the “media effects model”, see Gauntlett 1998. For my position – close to David Gauntlett’s position – see Sorice 2000 and 2005a.} \]
Marxist scholars had generated a concept of the audience as a one-dimensional and manipulated mass; on the other hand the tradition coming from functionalist research had given cultural and methodological legitimation to the idea that the media were only and exclusively tools of manipulation over a passive mass audience. Moreover, the idea of the “public as mass”, in its simplified perspective, was a really useful weapon with which the Marxist theorists could attack the power and ideological structure of the media institutions and Catholic scholars could stigmatize the lack of ethics in media discourse. One of the consequences of this linkage was the adoption of determinist approaches to audience research, strongly based on over-quantitative methods. Using the four-part division of audience research proposed by Kim Shröder and others (cfr. Schröder, Drotner, Kline, Murray 2003; Sorice 2005) we could say that this Italian research essentially concentrated on the first two dimensions (quantitative and experimental research), marginalizing the qualitative approaches and, particularly, reception studies and ethnographic research. Many audience research projects – still ten years ago – were based upon the idea that audiences were mere passive masses, with no critical spirit and composed of undifferentiated people. In the many years of media studies, the different paradigms of communication studies have produced various ways of interpreting (and therefore of studying) the audience. From the mass audience of the magic bullet theory to the stratified and diversified but still substantially passive audience of the first phase of functionalist media sociology; from the articulated public of the Uses and Gratifications approaches to the active audience concept, elaborated within Cultural and Media Studies (even if, in this case, the
concept of “activity” was not intended in the highly simplified sense coming from an over-simple “vulgate” that circulated in the universities too). The different concepts of audience have led to extremely diversified research methodologies, often using strongly ideologized research methods, above all those deriving from perspectives that seek to frame general laws. The new styles of consumption (including television consumption) testify to a society that is very different from the one of twenty or thirty years ago: we have now, for example, a diffused, fragmented and diversified audience. To try to analyze this audience with tools derived from a “one-dimensional” conception of the public would mean to fall into a typical positivist prejudice. Nevertheless much of the Italian audience research being conducted today remains locked within this prejudice.

In other cases the reflection on research methods has obscured the real focus, which is – as seen above – the “concept” and the “substance” of the new audiences. For example, the Social Uses of Television model, elaborated by James Lull, although strongly based upon a post-functionalist structure and heavily linked to the Uses and Gratifications approach\(^3\), enjoyed great success in Italy and has frequently been considered a paradigmatic model of Audience Studies developed in the Cultural Studies perspective. In relation to this, it is worth remembering that the most interesting aspect of Lull’s research of the 1980s is the adoption of an ethnographic perspective, not its theoretical approach, which remains within the Uses and Gratifications tradition. In any case, many researchers have considered that in order to understand the new audiences it was sufficient to adopt an ethnographic perspective,

\(^{3}\) On the fundamental defects of the “uses and gratifications” model, see Hall 1973 (13) and Morley 1992 (52-54).
without thinking about what “new audiences” are.

Many scholars and researchers have chosen to adopt theoretical formulations from approaches and “methods” developed within the tradition of Cultural Studies (with reference initially to the work of David Morley, Dorothy Hobson, Charlotte Brunsdon, Roger Silverstone, Dick Hebdige, David Buckingham etc., and then diverging into the partially different approaches of those such as Sonia Livingstone, David Gauntlett, Annette Hill, the Northern European “school”, etc.). Once again the merger takes place by virtue of the rejection of the concept of audience as a shapeless mass of individuals, a rejection made both jointly and independently by scholars coming from different cultural backgrounds and research traditions. An important “turning point” in Italian audience studies was represented by the concept of the “audiovisual conversation”, elaborated in 1982 by Gianfranco Bettetini, some years after the elaboration of Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model and, only few months later, David Morley’s research on the reception of the television programme Nationwide. Bettetini says that all texts, including those which are less open and more mono-directional (such as broadcast communications), develop around a relationship of symbolic interactivity between two subjects (the enunciator and the receiver) which are, in their turn, symbolic productions. The idea that the text might predispose a conversation between the two subjects, to whose shape the empirical receiver can of course correspond with a series of behaviours going from the most passive acceptance to the most complete refusal (Bettetini 1991:123) can be still useful in studying the new mobile audiences. But

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4 Bettetini’s model strongly rejects determinism and adopts the framework of the active audience,
what are mobile audiences? And how many kinds of mobile audiences exist? And, even if not in the hyper-optimistic and banalized scheme used in some Italian scholars’ theories and in early US ethnographic research. Also, the idea of a “continuum”, from the passive acceptance of the text’s dominant position to its antagonistic refusal, places Bettetini’s work on the path opened up by David Morley in his study of the Nationwide audience (1980; dominant text position/dominant audience position) and in some ways it anticipates the problematic but most important concept of the diffused audience (with its “continuum” from the consumer to the petty producer) elaborated recently by Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998). Aiming to overcome some of the conceptual difficulties of the “diffused audience” concept, I have recently proposed (Sorice 2005b) the adoption of the concept of “widened audience” in which the function of ideology is emphasized (it was given little prominence in the earliest theorizations of the diffused audience concept). In the same time, independently (and significantly), Nick Couldry (2005) proposed a similar (and perhaps also more useful) thesis by conceptualizing “extended audiences”.

first of all, does the audience still exist?

2. Does the audience still exist?

To belong to an audience represents a criterion of cultural reference and it can not be limited to the simple action of “watching” television or consuming the products of any other medium. Consequently, to study the audience means to take in consideration different contexts and multiple activities of cultural consumption. In this situation it is not conceivable that the audience can be studied and “understood” only using tools of quantitative measurement. Even if such measurements are scientifically useful, they can only capture an isolated moment of one portion of the real. Many scholars have written at length about the scientific relevance of tools of measurement, such as the
“people meter”; however, in my opinion, this is a marginal problem. The question of reliability (which is important from both a methodological and an ethical point of view) is in fact of lesser importance than the more general question of the structure of audiences today.

The audience has been deeply transformed; its fragmentation but also its reconstitution into shapes that only few years ago were unthinkable obliges us to question the very existence of the audience itself. Or, at least, of the audience as we have tried to represent it in the past. Staiger (2000), for instance, says that the common-sense understanding of “audience” is simply an academic construction. Maybe Staiger “goes a little far with her insistence” on this topic, as Karen Ross and Virginia Nightingale (2003) have noted. However, we must not forget that when, for example, we assert that a particular TV program has reached a certain share or has gained a certain position in the all-time top ten of a network, we are only giving one possible representation of the audience. Also, the idea of people watching television with drinks and snack in the hands (Fiske 1989) is only one of the possible representations. But, it’s obvious, the mutations of the audience mutations oblige us to rethink its representations too. From this point of view, the exploring public of the satellite TV networks (but also of IpTv and some trends on the borders of TV such as YouTube) represents a collective subject that is not easy to explain with the mere logic of “contacts”.

From the research perspective it is a matter of trying to understand if, for example, the home is still the most meaningful place in which to study the audience (as the earliest ethnographic research maintained). Or maybe there are other important places where people perform their role as audience members? Nick Couldry’s question (2005) on this topic is very important:
“Is there only one site for studying the audience ‘close-up’ or is the point, precisely, to study the linkages between many sites in contemporary culture in order to grasp the contemporary audience?” (Couldry 2005: 186). We should, still, mention the great topic of interactivity (still in a nascent phase for the mass audience): it is obvious, in fact, that in this framework the space of representation is often "doubled". The process of doubling of interaction (conceptualized by Shaun Moores in 2005, developing the important idea of doubling of space elaborated by Paddy Scannell in 1996) is typical of the subjects who can approach and use several communication technologies: they can therefore establish space-remote connections with many other individuals but at the same time they have the tools allowing them to have human relations of proximity in the natural setting of media consumption. This situation, obviously, changes the whole context of consumption of media. Interactivity (including weak TV interactivity) breaks with the idea of the passive public which is the theoretical foundation of research based on measurement. From here it becomes necessary to rethink the tools of audience research and also the whole structure of the research methodology.

3. Mobile Audiences: diffused, extended and maybe dissolved

The essence of discursive realism consists in the belief that there is a social reality that exists independently of language, but our only access to knowledge about this reality goes through language and other sign systems. This position is in contrast to both the empiricist belief in our ability to acquire true knowledge about a reality unaffected by the human understanding of it, and to the interpretativist belief that reality is our discursive understanding of this reality.
This statement by Kim Schrøder and others describes very well the many different positions in media research and, particularly, in audience research. The bipartition between empiricist and interpretativist approaches is typical of the whole of social research: it has had great importance in shaping methodological choices and has played a not secondary role also in the formulation of media studies.

The problem of the relationship between reality and language has been present in a great part of the human thought, from Aristotle to the present. The basic question has remained the same from many centuries: does the real exist outside of our description of it (in other words outside our language)? Or is the real only a human discursive construction?

In the empiricist perspective we can place all the schools that have preferred quantitative approaches or, at any rate, that have believed they could describe in an “objective” way a reality that is pre-given and external to us. In media studies, similar positions were assumed by the research trends and the scholars close to functionalist sociology (and all those research traditions that have thought it possible “to object” the real: from effects theories to behavioural approach, from transmission theories even if not all of them - to technological determinism).

In the interpretative perspective we can put the research tendencies that have benefited from the hybridization with semiotics and all the theories and researches born in the frame of Cultural Studies. This second perspective has had the merit of introducing our “social speech” itself among the social phenomena to be observed and thus of treating it as non-neutral in the development of those phenomena: this approach has allowed the development
of deeper and more complex research methods, able to consider the observed phenomena in their complexity.

On this topic, we can consider the importance of the “context” as background for the rethinking of many communication theories (see also Sorice 2005a). The principle of indetermination elaborated by Heisemberg in physics has constituted an important element also for reflection, in an interpretativist way, in the social sciences. In the last few years, the reflection on media audiences has itself determined a rethinking in research approaches. In this phase we can place all the studies and researches that Alasuutari (1999) call “the third phase” or constructionist approaches. In any case, the inadequacy of an only interpretative approach became obvious when Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst warned of the inadequacy of the Incorporation/Resistance paradigm as a key to reading the relationship between media and audience. This inadequacy was moreover evidenced by David Morley in his “postscript” (1981) to his important research on Nationwide and by Sonia Livingstone (1999), who defined the media not only as interpretative frameworks but also as resources allowing individuals to define their identities in between the relationships they establish with the media.

The diffused audience concept has been useful for researching the new ways of “audiencing”. The diffused audiences are composed of individuals who are constantly members of a public, regardless of their performance and of the specific qualities of the media product (Sorice 2005a). Audiences, in other words, who are typical of modern performative societies and at the same time with roots in interpretative micro-communities and in the social uses of new technologies and digital media. The concept of diffused audience however might be inadequate to
explain some phenomena, such as those related to the increase of some types of “manipulation” in the age of globalization (manipulation based upon control of access more than on control of contents) but it is also inadequate to understand some forms of communications, such as media-activism for example. In other words, the concept of diffused audience risks being too “optimistic” compared with the situation we can observe in field research. As for the need to use the concept of extended audience (Couldry 2005; Sorice 2005b): with this notion, in effect, we attempt to consider the whole spectrum of relations between the media and audiences as part of the more general media culture; at the same time the idea of extended audiences allows us to consider that the “dispersal” of the diffused audiences is not necessarily a matter of strength and “independence” for the people.

These brief reflections allow us to rethink the two main research approaches of the last two decades: the empiricist and the interpretative.

The difficulty of “catching” the audience has pushed us towards methodological pluralism and made us attempt to overcome the antinomy “empirism/interpretativism”. From this point of view an approach like that which Kim Schröder (2003) has defined as discursive realism proves really useful.

Discursive realism helps us reconsider audience research methods as a whole and also the foundations of research methodology. Between empiricism and interpretativism we have to choose a “third way”. On the one hand this connects to the interpretative approach, according to which the findings (whether quantitative or qualitative) represent only an interpreted version of the real. On the other it is close to the empiricist approaches; we
also have to recognize the need for generalization in order to avoid a total relativism which would make every social analysis impossible. So, we cannot “photograph” the audience objectively but we can anyway interpret it through operational generalizations (the theories).

An important test for a new approach to audience studies consists in mobile audience research, in which we need to remember that mobile audiences are strongly segmented, diffused and diversified. It is no longer possible to study the television audience with the positivist view of the past; it is quite impossible to study the many shapes of mobile audiences without the adoption of a holistic perspective, in other words a perspective that is prepared to try and understand the phenomena in their articulation and complexity. In other words, the communication products (messages, texts, genres, also the media) must be studied inside a wider process, that of discursive practices (that is to say the relations between the organizations of production and the dynamics of reception), which constitute the frame in which the communication products are placed; at the same time discursive practices must be considered in the frame of more general socio-cultural processes (such as globalization, tabloidization, spectacularization, democratization, etc.) which are the connective tissue over which the discursive practices and the media products are placed.

The idea of an audience composed of a determinate number of people listening or watching media events in a precise moment is now only one of many possibilities. Several researches have pointed out that the audiencing process is active also in many experiences of consumption that do not take place in a specific moment and a predictable physical space.
Is in-store radio listening in a shopping mall or a department store different from home or car radio listening? Does ‘real’ consumption of music only happen in listening to concerts? Is there not a public that downloads their favorite songs from the Internet or listens to music on an iPod, often displaying a new type of “conspicuous consumption”? This is not surprising if we consider the process of aestheticization that involves many media tools. And what kind of audience is the one made up of travellers on the tube watching TV programs while they are waiting for trains? They are, in any event, de-localized audiences, whose main feature lies in the logic of “involvement”. And sometimes of “performativity”.

4. Involvement and Performativity

Involvement is one of the concepts commonly used in reception studies and in the analysis of the “audiencing” process. The concept of involvement emphasizes particularly the relational and affective aspect implied in the reception process. Communicating means not only transmitting messages and managing social meanings; it also means making social relations. The communication process is always relational. Furthermore, every relation always contains symbolic and communicative aspects. More than a dozen of years ago, Wendy Griswold (1994, 1997:190 ff.), following McLuhan, observed that the media consent to give a community different foundations. Not only the space community but also the relational community.

In any type of relation it is necessary to consider that beyond the plane of content there is always –consciously or unconsciously – also an aspect of self-definition or, as Goffman pointed out (1959), of self-presentation and of definition of the relation between self and other (this
emerges from the interactive context or “situation” but it is also conditioned by the socio-cultural context in which people live and act). Goffman’s theoretical formulations are important also for the concept of performance.

Performance is an important concept in Goffman’s *dramaturgical model* of self-presentation within different social settings (Goffman 1959), a model that continues to be of relevance for the analysis of modern communication, including interactions or quasi-interactions conducted via internet and broadcasting» (Moores 2005: 158).

According to Moores – and I agree with him on this – “notions of performance and performativity can be useful to us in our thinking on various forms of cultural identity (that is, if we understand creativity and reproduction not as opposing elements but as interdependent)6.

Performances in a range of contexts are best made sense of in terms of what Giddens (1993) names the structuration of social practices” (Moores 2005: 159). Contemporary audiences – and particularly mobile audiences – represent a complete example not only of the merger of creativity and reproduction but also of performativity and involvement as social practices. The audiencing process is not merely

5 It can be useful to remember – with many qualifications – the classic distinction between communitarian and social relation elaborated by Tönnies (1887). The communitarian relation, as Tönnies suggested, is that in which people are joined despite everything that separates them; in the social relation, instead, people are separated although there are common roots. These are the two poles of the involvement. According to Tönnies the communitarian relation can have three roots and three shapes: blood community (family relationship), place community (environs, village community), faith or ideal community.

6 On this topic, see Sorice 1995, in which I pointed out the “intimate connection” between cultural creativity and social reproduction.
consumption as “dissipation” but more precisely a continuous oscillation between creativity, tactical choices, involvement (and sometimes its refusal, which is the same) and identity construction. In this sense traditional audiences – based upon a rigid distinction between creativity and social reproduction – are dead. But this doesn’t mean that there are no audiences; just that they are very different from some years ago.

Let us consider an example that has to do with the logic of “viewing”. Traditional television consumption meant watching in the sense of casting our gaze over something that was “separated” from us. For example, if I watch a concert on TV in this way I am a spectator and what I see is the concert as perceived through the grammars of television. In the experience of Second Life\footnote{It is not important in this case if the Second Life residents are nine million or 600,000. See also Sorice 2007a.}, on the other hand, I can participate in a rock concert in a very different way: I see my avatar (my simulacral image) who is placed facing a TV screen with other avatars to see a concert performed by “real” artists exclusively for that “virtual” world. The interaction become \(n\)-dimensional, considering all the “connections” I could establish with the others avatars. In other words, I am at the same time within and outside the observed phenomenon; I am an observer who is observed by myself and by other people who, in their turn, live a similar experience of multiplication of the interaction. What is the audience I can study here? And how?

At the same time, what kinds of audiences are those composed of iPod users? How can we study them?
5. A research project on Mobile Audiences

Since February 2007 CRISC-CMCS (Centre for Media and Cultural Studies) has been engaged in research on mobile audiences. In reality this project is part of a wider research programme on media consumption using a generational approach. This large-scale project involves a network of five Italian universities: the Catholic University of Milan, the University of Rome “la Sapienza” and the universities of Urbino, Bergamo and Trento. It constitutes an interesting example of the use of a hybrid and multidimensional methodology.

As far as the section on mobile media use is concerned, the most innovative aspect is probably the choice of avoiding the study of the relation between contents and individuals, preferring a detailed investigation of the general landscape of people’s media consumptions from the point of view of involvement and activism. In this perspective we believe it is important to study phenomena such as the use and conspicuous display of multi-media connection tools: the process of aestheticization of the iPod, for example, could be a significant case, at least in metropolitan areas of Italy. It is connoted as an element of the audiencing process, a process not limited to the relationships between consumed contents and consumption dynamics. This change in conceptualizing audiencing leads us to some important consequences for the audience research:

1) individuals are always an audience and not only when they agree to become targets of a particular media content (theatre performance, concert, television, etc.), by virtue of the fact that we live within a continuous flow of media contents which request our involvement;

2) there are some differences in consumption styles and, perhaps, in the
characteristics of the involvement (in quality and quantity);

3) the logic of contacts represents only and exclusively a pre-condition in the analysis of consumption; it does not constitute a fundamental element of the media consumption;

4) fieldwork (including ethnographic work) needs to consider that the different audiencing phenomena are not isolated elements and that there is not a “delimited frame” of media use: the natural “setting” is fragmented, like consumption styles, and multidimensional, like the consumed contents;

5) all the methods based upon “effects theory” and/or “uses and gratifications” theoretical approaches are therefore inadequate: they can be useful only in the study of small portions of the general background in which the media audiences are placed.

For these reasons it is urgent that we should adopt research approaches based upon hybrid methods and also try to redefine the whole theoretical field of audience research. This is far too large a task for a single researcher or research group: my hope is that the new ECREA section, “Audience and Reception Studies”, will become a privileged place for the implementation of this really important work of theoretical redefinition and mapping out of a new field of study.
6. References


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MOBILE AUDIENCES.
Methodological Problems and New Perspectives in Audience Studies

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