

The public manifestations of the audience

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Abstract

Mobile communication has confirmed our entry in the Post-Network Era (in particular, but not exclusively, through television programming). This state of affairs has not only challenged the economics of the television industry by rendering the “capture” of audiences (principally through programming) more complex, and random, but also the basic notion of audience itself. In so doing, this Post-Network Era has re-activated, but in a more dialectical fashion, the earlier debate that accompanied the spread of cultural industries and the introduction of the Network Era, when and where “audiences” became a substitute for “publics”, “ratings” for “popular approval”, and “opinion polls” for “public debates”. The present Era offers the occasion to reflect on how “audiences” were and are constructed, how they manifest themselves, and what impact these constructions and manifestations have held on our conception, and research, of “publics” (as in the French tradition of “les publics” and “auditoire”), of “mass” and “mob”.

Keywords: audience, publics, crowds, mass, cultural industries.

As to the question “Why are we here?” the answer will or will not become apparent at the closing session. But I can say at this very moment why *I* am here. First, because of an invitation for which I am most honored, but also, and mainly, because *you* are here.

In a very self-centered viewpoint I saw this gathering as a rare opportunity to share a growing personal concern with what Martin A. Schwartz, Department of Microbiology, University of Virginia, observes as the vanishing “importance of stupidity in scientific research” (2008). By this he does not advocate that scientists should *be* stupid, but that they should *feel* stupid, become *stupidified* (if such a word exists), feel ignorant about things and to “boldly” venture forth into the unknown. In other words, scientists should not be right all the time, offer the *right* answers to questions that are put to them by those whose interests are not always those of searching the unknown universe of ignorance. No one is advocating that scientists should not provide useful and life saving knowledge in all realms of human endeavor, but not to the extent of extinguishing critical thought.

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MATRIZes

As I understand, Martin Schwartz invites us to step outside what has become our comfort zone (routinely producing and reproducing facts — and some would say, ideologies — while not questioning these very facts and the issues, both social and theoretical, they may embody).

In this light I am feeling more and more stupid as to the well-established and well-researched subject known as the *audience*. As books, facts and figures are routinely published on the subject and research tools more and more refined to track the audiences; this subject has become more and more allusive and nebulous. And more so with the widespread uses of the Internet, by both producers and consumers of “cultural contents”. (Another subject about which I feel increasingly less assertive and more and more stupid is the subject of “culture”).

And so, in a matter of speaking, I am here so that I may share, and hopefully spread, my feeling of stupidity about audiences, to set up audiences as an unknown, as a field to venture into, less in an assertive but rather in a bumbling fashion so that I may, somehow, say something of significance as to the manner in which the audiences are constructed, as to how audience has become an everyday affair in the construction of Self.

My objective is to put forth a few select quotes and homespun definitions that hopefully can conjure up this uncharted universe, called for a better name, *audience*.

I will start with my favorite quote from Richard Butsch (2008)

[...] audience is a situated role that people temporarily perform, and in their performance people produce representations of audiences. Also, the role is situated in institutions of entertainment, news, and media that construct subject positions for audiences and, in so doing, represent audiences. Governments, moral entrepreneurs, and others outside this relationship too have represented audiences through their discourse and response to audiences. (p. 3)

I would like to single out the idea that audience is a « situated role that people temporarily perform ». Each word is equally laden with significance. A role is quite the opposite of a status. Status is a *given* such as birth rank and social position. Roles are usually defined as performances expected of those occupying a given position or status. Do audiences act, play the expected role according to a given status? And who gives the status of an audience? Are the readers of elite newspapers given the status, by the news media and researchers, of enlightened readers and are they expected to play the role of enlightened readers and perhaps of enlightened citizens? Are the audiences with the given status of “mass audience” expected to perform as “masses” that is “as a

mass of isolated individuals who [are] vulnerable to manipulation or distracted from their responsibilities as citizens”? (Butsch, 1).

Is it the given status, or the temporary, situated, performance that delineates the audience? In a media world of high mobility, one may suggest that temporary, situated, performances far outweigh given statuses as an empirical research concept and tool. In other words, those that give statuses to audiences (the news media, entertainment industries, government agencies, moralists, social science researchers) seem to be at a loss in tracking the ever-illusive audiences at least in their public manifestations. It is more and more hazardous to track the public manifestations of those audiences commonly known among researchers as the *mass* audience, the *active* audience, the *resistant* audience, the *interpreting* audience, the *preferred reading* audience, and the *public minded* audience. Part of the problem is our main tracking device, that of consumerism. Those who buy/listen to individual music groups, buy/watch movie genres, television programs, buy/read elite newspapers or popular people magazines are given to be the respective audiences and to perform accordingly: that is they buy/watch/listen — in a word, consume — said products thus constituting, by performing as such, the audience. Once tracked, located, then one can register their performances and evaluate it in terms of good (the expected) or bad (the unforeseen). These performances give “materiality” to the given status.

The question that now makes me “feel stupid”, because I once thought that I could answer and now I am increasingly unsure. is: how does one “perform” as an audience, especially if this performance is temporary and situated and produces representations of audiences.

My earlier research centered on television programming and television ratings. This research was nested within the larger question of the maintaining of a nearly 400 year old North American French language cultural identity (formerly known as *Canadien*, then *Canadien français* and now divided into separate entities called *Québécois* as distinct from the other marginally numbered French language North American groups such as the *Acadiens*, the *Cajuns*, the *franco-canadiens* and the *franco-américains*). Since the end of the 19th century, up until the 1960s and beyond, the social, political and territorial organization of the predominantly French language population of the Québec province (or Québec *société*) underwent transformation through, among other developments, mass mediated circulation of news, information and entertainment. In as much as these local French language news and entertainment mass media were

producing content aimed at an enlightened popular national audience, the question became: would that audience perform accordingly. That is would they, as they consumed said news and entertainment content, perform and produce a French language, national, enlightened (i.e. modern) *Québécois* cultural identity. Put simply, if *Québécois* content was produced for a *Québécois* audience would said audience by consuming said content, represent themselves as *Québécois*.

This question was deemed of necessity because of the structure of the North America media market. Language was not a barrier to the South-North flow of media content. The local French language news and entertainment media (radio, television, press, recording industries) were far outnumbered and under financed within the local media market. To answer the question, therefore, was to equate performance (to act as a *Québécois* television audience and therefore to represent themselves as *Québécois*) with consumption: in my case, with television ratings. It turned out, at the time of my research, during the 1990s, that two third of television consumption (ratings) were of the local *Québécois* production while two third of the television offer was mainly North American i.e. USA production. Conclusion: audiences performed as given, they represented themselves and manifested publically as *Québécois*. A case in point: local production of televised fictional series, called *téléroman*, was given as specifically *Québécois* and therefore culturally dissimilar to the French *téléfeuilleton*, the Latin American *telenovela* and the American *soap* and *series*. These televised fictions did gather large numbers of viewers who, through publically published ratings, would be identified as the audience of a typically *Québécois* televised fiction and therefore come to represent themselves as *Québécois*. In terms of aesthetics and of textual analysis, these *téléromans* may have been dissimilar to the *téléfeuilleton*, the *telenovela*, the *soap*, but in terms of mode of production and audience construction, they were not.

With today's media mobility, in terms of production, circulation and consumption, such a question is ... out of the question. The common usage of the tracking device of media consumption (ratings) is not up to the task (with an acceptable level of certainty, that is).

Thus I return to the notion of audience and of audience as performance: what does it mean to perform as an audience? What are the basic conditions of audience? Does an audience manifest itself other than by consumption?

AUDIENCE AS AUDITOIRE

Here I refer to audience as an *auditoire* (from the Latin *audire*, to hear). To perform as an *auditoire/audience*, basically, is to be within a hearing space-time range of a locution² (from the Latin *loqui*, to speak); that is, within the hearing distance of an “utterance regarded in terms of its intrinsic meaning or reference, as distinct from its function or purpose in context” (Webster Dictionary). The individuals gathered within hearing distance of such utterances at the given time of such utterances constitute, basically, an *auditoire/audience*. In many cases, such as an open-air concert, the constitution, however temporary, of a situated *auditoire/audience*³ is in itself, its public manifestation.

When one “lends his or her ear”, to paraphrase Marc Anthony⁴ in *Julius Caesar*, s/he is situated within hearing distance of a *locuteur* (one who speaks), s/he plays the role of an *auditeur/auditrice* and becomes, for a time, the *auditoire* (or audience).

To perform as an *auditoire*, people are usually gathered, either in a public space (such as an open air concert) or in an institutionalized space (such as a church or in classroom) or in a private space (such as a secret gathering). As mentioned by Butsch, one may slip in and out of any or all of these three *auditoires*. For example a religious university student, member of a radical fundamentalist group will attend an open-air concert, attend church services, sit in a classroom and participate in secret meetings all of which constitute as many *auditoires*⁵.

Auditoires have become, for more than a century, an object of concern for many “powers that be” and an object of research for some scientific disciplines, mostly of the social and human variety. But, evidently, *auditoires* predate modern times and scientific endeavors. Since the advent of human language,

² As distinct from *illocution* (“an action performed by saying or writing something e.g. ordering, warning, or promising”) and *perlocution* (“an act of speaking or writing that has an action as its aim but that in itself does not effect or constitute the action, for example persuading or convincing”).

³ For the sake of clarity, I will use *auditoire* as a substitute for audience, which is a gathering of listeners within a hearing distance of the spoken words of a speaker. I will also use *auditoire* to designate a gathering of readers of the written words of a writer. While the first gathering takes place within a same time/space range, the second gathering is dispersed over time and space.

⁴ Mark Antony (*Marcus Antonius*), William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene 2: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.”

⁵ The point I wish to make here is that the notion of *auditoire* (or audience) should not be restricted to mass media but extended to other centers of locution: political parties (for example, rallies and propaganda), churches (for example, sermons and missives), universities (for example, classrooms and “readings”), etc.

MATRIZes

people have gathered to hear, to listen and to speak. And they have, for the most part, done so in a manifested “public” way.

In April of this year the Quebec provincial government tabled a belt-tightening budget as did all of the governing bodies in nearly all of the so-called developed and most of the developing countries. The message was clear and identical: we are in the midst of a crisis and we have to pull together, make the necessary sacrifices if we are to overcome and resume economic growth and prosperity. Translation; “we need more revenue to cover expenditures and the most effective measure is through taxation, either direct or indirect, and cutback in services”.

A local talk show host, on a commercial radio repeated a simple message: let the State preach through example. Let it tighten its own belt, before tightening the taxpayer’s belt by cutting down expenses, by eliminating frivolous spending, by making better use of existing resources and by “trimming the fat” i.e. by downsizing. The host then invited his listeners to make suggestions, to offer examples of waste spending. After a week or so of reported cases of waste spending, he then invited his listeners to gather in a public park on a Sunday morning and then to march, in an orderly but joyous fashion, toward the Parliament building. On that appointed day, between 15 and 50 thousand (depending to whom you spoke) gathered to hear different speakers, to march, to jeer and then, to quietly return to their homes.

This was a public manifestation of at least two auditoires. First those who gathered around the speakers on that Sunday morning and second those that had tuned in, on a regular basis or not, to the talk show host. But were these two auditoires identical? And did these two auditoires account for the large turnout? Among those who manifested were also those who never listened to the talk show host but who had heard of the message and the call to gather through other radio talk shows, through televised and radio newscasts, through conversation in public places such as coffee houses and public transportation. The event was a public manifestation of not one, not two, but of many auditoires, of many previous temporary, situated, gatherings within the hearing distance of spoken words (locutions), be they on radio, television or in public places.

What happened is that those who gathered in this one place, at a specific time on a Sunday morning, to hear spoken words had, prior, gathered, some in a specific time and place, others at a

specific time but in spatially dispersed fashion to hear other spoken words. Different *auditoires*, but out of each a same person may have slipped in or out. How many of these temporary, situated, *auditoires* manifested themselves publically? One may suggest that the *auditoire* that gathered in that park on that Sunday morning was an amalgamation, a mixture of all above, and then try to separate and to identify each within this large public manifestation but a question remains: why did they gather? Why did the individuals who played the role of the *auditoire* for the particular utterances of the different radio and television talk shows and newscasts and for public conversations come to the park to produce a public manifestation of a particular given *auditoire*; that of representing themselves as the voice of frustrated taxpayers, as the voice of the *people*?

In other words, the temporary *auditoire* that gathered to hear the speakers on Sunday morning in that particular, situated, park and the march that followed was in itself a public manifestation not of the prior *auditoires* but the product of other temporary, situated, performances played by other *auditoires*, included those of the reader audience of the daily newspapers.

FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION

To perhaps, and hopefully, launch a discussion I would like to set up a somewhat framework so as to disquiet my feeling of stupidity as to what is an audience.

At this point I would like to introduce four homespun definitions: the substantives « technology » and « media » (or *technique*), and the verbs « to link » and « to connect ».

Technology: the capability through art and science to change things, to interfere in the process of change whether in inert or life forms with the aim of governance and control. Example: rhetoric, argumentation, persuasion as an art form of producing and changing mental representations would be considered a technology as would television as a scientific, empirically sustained hypothesis of transmitting sound and images through space and time.

Media: technology materialized, that is the physical, instrumental, means of interfering with the aim of controlling the processes of change. Example, the theater and amphitheater or television set.

MATRIZes

To link: the communications channel that binds two or more communicating devices or individuals. To link or to be linked may also indicate an interconnection that is not of one's choosing. To link is not to connect.

To connect: to become connected, joined or united by one's own choosing. Example, in a family one is linked to the other members; one connects with those of his or her choosing (favorite cousin, aunt, uncle) that breeds familiarity.

As technology develops and media proliferate, the possibility of a worldwide auditoire of linked individuals could become a reality in the near future. However because of their dispersion, it is only when individually linked (willingly or not) members of this auditoire choose to connect with one another, choose to relate to one another, could there emerge a public manifestation; the manifestation of a *public* (of a public voice).

THE ONE TO THE MANY

Because one of technology's affect on change is governance and control, through media, the relation installed in auditoire is the One to the Many.

It may be said that in any and all forms of collective cohabitation, people have gathered to listen, to enter into a relationship with a speaker, this relationship being the One (speaker) with the Many (auditoire).

It may also be stated that over time, speakers have developed many forms (or what I call technologies) of speaking. Two of these would be storytelling and persuasion (or rhetoric). Storytelling and persuasion have in countless instances changed the evolution of things and created events. In early times one can imagine that in these technologies, because of the necessity of being within a hearing distance did indeed produce public manifested auditoires and that these manifestations, in some (many?) cases, did produce changes with the aim of increasing control and governance.

Over time media (or *techniques*), such as amphitheaters, were introduced to augment the numbers of *auditeurs* (listeners) and thus the size of audience. While increased in size, audiences

MATRIZes

continued to manifest themselves in public, or semi-public, spaces. As the technology of storytelling and persuasion progressed, and as the media increased the auditoires, their manifestations multiplied. Different forms of storytelling and persuasion made for different forms of audiences.

In turn the auditoires not only manifested themselves in public or semi-public spaces but they were also becoming, publicly identified and labeled usually by the “powers that be” (political, economic, religious, intellectual).

Then as now auditoires were neither silent nor passive. People came, they listened but they also expressed themselves (sometimes violently). And as they did, speakers sometimes anticipated their spoken words with their own; at other times they echoed them. Butsch offers as a milestone in the history of auditoires, the Elizabethan theater and particularly Shakespeare’s Globe Theater. At that particular time, while at public gatherings (in theaters) words disturbing to the ears of authority, be they secular or religious, were often spoken if not shouted. But they were tolerated because they were spoken in public and because they were contained in time and space and therefore controlled. At that time no media (including the theater) could extent the auditoire to uncontrollable proportions. However what the Globe theater represented or exemplified was the coming together, the coming in contact, within a public manifestation of an auditoire (the theater goers), different and opposing interests: those of the governing, the wealthy and the powerful and those of the governed, the poor and the underprivileged. The play, as it were, played to two different auditoires within the same time and space frame and each auditoire (the privileged and the underprivileged) began to represent itself not only as different from the other but as it’s opposite. The relationship between the One (play) and the Many became a relationship that was played out between the Many (between the different ways the different “interests” gathered performed).

Following this came the advent of the scientific mode of reasoning, and the media that new technology produced to materialize itself. One technology of scientific reasoning was the spreading of the spoken word without the speaker: the idea and the media of the printed word. The printed word traveled far and wide and gathered many readers and thus produced a large auditoire, as never before. But this auditoire did not gather within a single space/time frame: it was dispersed over space and time, it was silent and it was invisible. Thus containment and

MATRIZes

control became a problem for those “powers that be”. With the unseen auditoire came the fear of the unknown.

Although silent and invisible, the auditoire of readers (the many) remained active and in relation to the One (the writer). And when this auditoire manifested itself publically it performed as given: that is as given by the One. Thus if the Many were given as the *people*, the nation, the exploited and if the auditoire performed as such the public manifestations could (and did) become rebellious, revolutionary. But if the Many (auditoire) were given as the dominant, the appointed, the powerful and if they performed as such then their public manifestation could (and did) become control, governance and power. You now could distinguish auditoires according to one’s social position: the many were no longer of one mind, nor of one voice nor of one locution.

While past public manifestations by given opposing “interests” were tolerated, because contained by the existing media, now they were feared by both the privileged and the underprivileged because the auditoires that represented themselves as adversary were made invisible and silent by the new media, and their public manifestations, unforeseeable. So now we enter into an era when auditoires become an object of concern, of engineering, of research, of discourse (to wit, the dominant paradigms of effects, uses and gratification, cultivation, interpretation/resistance in communication studies. Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998).

Technology and media continue to expand the auditoire, to gather ever greater numbers of linked individuals, to bring the many to hear, to glance, to purview, but also to listen, to watch, to read, to remain gathered, to remain linked. To maximize governance and control, and consequently to minimize public manifestations, the relation within the auditoire should remain the One (the speaker, the writer) to the dispersed invisible, silent, but active, linked many and should be allowed to maximize its ability to slip in and out, thus minimizing connectedness.

Only when linked members of an auditoire choose to connect, when the relation slips from the One to the Many to become one among the many, then the chances of a manifestation of a *public* (a public *voice* or locution) could become a real possibility.

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