

Applying audience theory to News

How audiences interpret the news, interact with the news, and can be actively involved in news production

The way in which different interpretations reflect social, cultural and historical contexts

Hall's typology of audience interpretations can now be tested by reading audience comments on online news articles, finding examples of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings.

These may also illustrate Jenkins' participatory culture, e.g. threads that develop their own direction away from the original article, and Shirky's argument that amateur producers have different motivations to those of professionals – they value autonomy, competence, membership and generosity – and that user-generated content creates emotional connection between people who care about something.

The influence of contexts

Several factors may influence the audience to actively interpret and interact with the news to a greater extent:

- the decline in deference to one's 'betters' – which has influenced our view that the public has a right to be heard and to argue with 'experts'
- a historical period that sees more political conflict (such as over Brexit, or increasing political polarisation) may accentuate this, as audiences may be clearer about their viewpoints during such times
- the impact of feminism has been to give women a more public voice
- the impact of multiculturalism has been to give ethnic minorities a more public voice
- changing attitudes to sexualities have given minority sexualities a more public voice
- a postmodern culture in which truth is a more relative concept may encourage the audience to dispute authority.

The different ways audiences defined by demographics, identity, and cultural capital use the news

The different needs of mass and specialised audiences and their significance to the news

How specialised audiences can be reached through different technologies and platforms, nationally and globally

Overview of different kinds of print and online newspapers serving very different audiences: regional, local, ethnic minority, religious groups, non-mainstream political groups, business people.

Overview of the levels of cultural capital required to understand different genres of newspaper, e.g. the broadsheet and tabloid press, and discussion of the different and similar gratifications offered by these newspapers.

Overview of how specialist audiences can be reached globally by online news media.

Academic ideas and arguments

<https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/421658-academic-ideas-and-arguments-factsheet.pdf>

Bandura

The media can influence people directly – human values, judgement and conduct can be altered directly by media modelling. The media may influence directly or by social networks, so people can be influenced by media messages without being exposed to them. Different media have different effects. The 'new' media offer opportunities for self-directedness.

Application

Studies of news sources that show the same values and judgements underlying different newspaper coverage (e.g. expressing core ideologies such as democracy and the rule of law, or individualism) may suggest a direct effect on audiences.

Studies of news sources with radically different values and judgements, or where audience comments suggest oppositional readings of the original articles, may suggest that news sources will have less of a direct effect.

Gerbner

Gerbner used content analysis to analyse repeated media messages and values, then found that heavy users of television were more likely, for example, to develop 'mean world syndrome' – a cynical, mistrusting attitude towards others – following prolonged exposure to high levels of television violence. Heavy TV viewing leads to 'mainstreaming' – a common outlook on the world based on the images and labels on TV.

Application

As Gerbner studied the effect of television his study is less directly applicable to print and online news, where competing viewpoints are common, except that long term media use may lead to cultivated effects.

Could be applied to audiences who remain within a print or digital 'bubble' and have their viewpoints constantly reinforced – 'Guardian-readers' and 'Mail-readers' who never read other sources of news.

The presence of alternative viewpoints – e.g. in comments on news articles – may count as evidence against the cultivation effect in online media.

Hall

Hall's 'encoding-decoding' model argued that media producers encode 'preferred meanings' into texts, but these texts may be 'read' by their audiences in a number of different ways:

- the dominant-hegemonic position
- the negotiated position
- the oppositional reading.

Application

As suggested above, comments on online news may be a rich source of these different readings, as will other forms of audience research. News sources will tend towards a 'preferred meaning' within journalistic discourse, supporting this theory, but any examples of deeply ironic or polysemic messages could work as counter-examples, though both the Guardian and Mail have a strong ethos that tends to pervade their material (perhaps less so in the Mail Online).

Jenkins

Fans act as 'textual poachers'. The development of the 'new' media has accelerated 'participatory culture', in which audiences are active and creative participants. They create online communities, produce new creative forms, collaborate to solve problems, and shape the flow of media.

Shirky

In the 'old' media, centralised producers addressed atomised consumers; in the 'new' media, every consumer is now a producer. Traditional media producers would 'filter then publish'; as many 'new' media producers are not employees, they 'publish then filter'.

These amateur producers have different motivations to those of professionals – they value autonomy, competence, membership and generosity. User-generated content creates emotional connection between people who care about something.

'The Audience' as a mass of people with predictable behaviour is gone. Now, behaviour is variable across different sites, with some of the audience creating content, some synthesising content and some consuming content. The 'old' media created a mass audience. The 'new' media provide a platform for people to provide value for each other.

Application

Examples of citizen journalism, interaction with news sites, and audiences using a media text as a starting point to generate a discourse that spills out in different directions would validate these approaches.

Examples where application of traditional news values sets the news agenda – i.e. much mainstream news reporting – would argue against these approaches.

Applying industry theory to News

The role of regulation in news and the impact of digital technologies on regulation

The self-regulation of the newspaper industry is illustrated by the competing regulatory bodies – IPSO (the Daily Mail's regulator) and Impress, and by the refusal of The Guardian to join either.

Social media companies insist that their role is as a platform rather than a publisher and their international nature means they are not (in 2018) subject to regulation.

Influence of contexts

The ideal of 'press freedom' reflects the political context of the role of newspapers in the development of an educated electorate in the historical period in which mass democracy developed. Its expression in the freedom of anyone to set up a newspaper reflects the economic context of free market capitalism. These two combine to restrict regulation to legal (e.g. the libel laws) and self-regulatory approaches. One specific political context is the unresolved conflict over the implementation of the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry – section 40 was not implemented as of 2018.

Political debates about the role of disinformation in online news and the influence of dark advertising (especially political advertising) may lead to some attempts to regulate social media companies, who are already (by 2018) responding to these criticisms in ways that bring them closer to traditional publishers rather than transparent online platforms. Facebook, for example, has recruited staff to filter content and has introduced a system for throwing light on dark political advertising. However, the lack of centralised regulation of social media companies means that different companies have different responses.

The effect of individual producers on news

The Daily Mail had, until 2018, a tradition of strongly expressed views reflecting those of its editor, Paul Dacre, but also the relatively consistent conservative social and political viewpoint of its columnists. Dacre's rather sudden replacement in September 2018 might be seen as suggesting that his forthright political assertions, particularly over Brexit, might have been seen as harming the brand and unpalatable to its owners. The Guardian, by contrast, tends to adopt a more collegiate style, with editorials and columnists expressing a wider variety of opinions ranging from the left of the Conservative party to the left of the Labour Party.

Influence of contexts

The rise of celebrity culture influences the prominence of the columnist who is a celebrity as well as columnists who write about celebrities. The impact of feminism can be seen in the number of female columnists in both the Guardian (rather more) and the Daily Mail (rather fewer).

Academic ideas and arguments

(See the document www.ocr.org.uk/Images/421658-academic-ideas-and-arguments-factsheet.pdf for the strengths and limitations of each theory.)

Power and media industries – Curran and Seaton

A political economy approach to the media – arguing that patterns of ownership and control are the most significant factors in how the media operate.

Media industries follow the normal capitalist pattern of increasing concentration of ownership in fewer and fewer hands. This leads to a narrowing of the range of opinions represented and a pursuit of profit at the expense of quality or creativity.

The internet does not represent a rupture with the past in that it does not offer a level playing field for diverse voices to be heard. It is constrained by nationalism and state censorship. News is still controlled by powerful news organisations, who have successfully defended their oligarchy.

Application

Studies of concentration of ownership and control will validate this theory.

Examples of diverse opinions (e.g. in online news or non-mainstream print newspapers) would argue against this theory, as would examples of newspapers sacrificing profit for the sake of quality and creativity (e.g. the Guardian refusing to put up a paywall but instead calling for supporters to fund quality journalism).



Regulation – Livingstone and Lunt

Studied four case studies of the work of Ofcom.

Ofcom are serving an audience who may be seen as consumers and/or citizens, with consequences for regulation: consumers have wants, are individuals, seek private benefits from the media, use the language of choice, and require regulation to protect against detriment; citizens have needs, are social, seek public or social benefits from the media, use the language of rights, and require regulation to promote the public interest.

Traditional regulation is being put at risk by: increasingly globalised media industries, the rise of the digital media, and media convergence.

Application

Originally applied to television and radio, but consumerism as defined in this study can be evidenced in the online editions of newspapers and increasingly in the print editions, with the traditional public interest news function being relatively marginalised (perhaps best illustrated by a comparison of a newspaper front page from the 1950s with its contemporary counterpart).

Examples of public debates about the role of social media companies in news and disinformation would support the idea of the difficulties of regulating globalised convergent media.

Examples of the new media operating in socially responsible ways in the public interest (as is starting to happen in 2018) would argue against this theory, as would the example of strongly regulated online content in authoritarian societies such as China.

Cultural industries – Hesmondhalgh

Cultural industries follow the normal capitalist pattern of increasing concentration and integration – cultural production is owned and controlled by a few conglomerates who vertically integrate across a range of media to reduce risk.

Risk is particularly high in the cultural industries because of the difficulty in predicting success, high production costs, low reproduction costs and the fact that media products are 'public goods' – they are not destroyed on consumption but can be further reproduced. This means that the cultural industries rely on 'big hits' to cover the costs of failure. Hence industries rely on repetition through use of stars, genres, franchises, repeatable narratives and so on to sell formats to audiences, then industries and governments try to impose scarcity, especially through copyright laws.

The internet has created new powerful IT corporations, and has not transformed cultural production in a liberating and empowering way – digital technology has sped up work, commercialised leisure time, and increased surveillance by government and companies.

Application

Examples of newspapers relying on predictable audience-pleasing low-risk news – such as royalty, celebrities, lifestyle and mainstream sport content – would count as evidence to support this theory.

Patterns of ownership and control that are not vertically integrated in large corporations, e.g. that of the Guardian, would count as evidence against this theory, as would evidence of the online media allowing a diverse range of new voices to be heard.

