

# Analysis of the Concept of Audience in the Digital Age

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**Abstract.** In the digital age, people's life has changed dramatically. Personal owned electronic devices are increasingly encroaching on people's lives, making people gradually move away from public areas, and think independently. Due to the progress of science and technology in the digital age, people are able to receive first-hand information more quickly and timely. The conveniences and changes that technology provided make audiences active thinkers with their own ideas. At the same time, people's sense of participation and the sense of seeking equality makes people unwilling to become the passive receiver at the end of the linear model, but the information creator. Thus, the concept of "audience" becomes more and more important, but the old theory and old concept of "audience" are no longer fit in today's digital age.

**Keywords:** digital age; first-hand information; audience's active thinkers.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of audience plays a crucial role in the realm of media communication, since it is not only the core concept, or the foothold that profoundly affects mass communication, but also intersects and overlays all issues in relation to communication theories. Therefore, gaining a better understanding towards audience is gaining a better understanding towards the core problem in mass communication, and ultimately towards ourselves (Hong, 2009). Fifteen years ago, Allor was far from alone in suggesting that 'the concept of audience is a more importantly underpinning championing for the analysis of the social impact on mass communication in general'. (Allor, 1988)

With the development of the society, especially the development of new technologies (e.g., the emergence of the internet), the concept of audience has changed, shifting from the notion a fixed identity of conventional, passive "receiver" towards a brand-new, active identity in the digital age. The past decades have witnessed the dramatic change in the media environment. As is known to all, the explosion of a wild diversity of websites, the proliferation of television channels, and the emergence of new content-delivery platforms, have remarkably changed the way people watch, listen to and comprehend information. We can easily see the sentence such as 'according to the netizens', 'from one of the internet users' etc. who are the netizens? They are the audience, but now they are also the spreaders.

## 2. New Technology in the Digital Age

Wireless technology and digitalization have profoundly changed people's consumption pattern, lifestyle, entertainment methods and leisure time. In the digital age, people become ever more heavily mediated, with respect to the higher level of the simultaneous convergence and diversification of media (Livingstone, 2016). First, we are witnessing a significant multiplication of personally owned media, including a wide variety of personal devices ranging from mobile phones, computers, laptops, E-books, to many other updated handhelds electronic equipment. All these fashionable stuffs have prevailed in people's daily life. Second, 'old' and 'new' media are diversifying in forms and contents, more television channels are now available, and more types of computers and video games are overwhelming. Third, with the advent of media, cable and personal computers, especially emerging media, information and telecommunication services, the interaction between media information and telecom services are become increasingly frequent. Last but not least, the most prominent change, and the potentially most radical of all, is the shift from one-way, mass communication towards more interactive communication between media providers and their consumers (Livingstone, 1999)

### **3. The Old Concept of Audience**

The definition of “audience” in the Dictionary of Modern Journalism is the receiver in the process of information communication, or the general name of reader, listener, and watcher (Gan, Qian and Hong, 1993). As a matter of fact, “audience” has been identified as an abstract and divisive concept. According to Wilbur Schramm, the word “audience” has been regarded as the “receiver” in the simple sequential model of the mass communication process (source, channel, message receiver, effect) for a long time (Schramm and Roberts, 1977). However, in earlier times, audience has an even more derogatory name: “target”, which derives from the “magic bullet theory” and has been quite popular in America during the 1930s. According to the magic bullet theory, audience is just like a target with absolutely no original or subjective ideas. The information producer using their muzzle aimed at the “target”, and their ideas, emotions and notions will be sent to the “target” directly without causing any responsive effects of the target quickly (Zhu, 2004). Overall, all the concepts of audience in the past have assumed that the audience is characterized as singular and passive. It seems that the definition to “audience” has always been misunderstood, which has still not been unified now though, since the referent itself is always changing with respect to the passage of time (McQuail, 1997), and change is the only thing that does not change (Philosophy for change, 2016).

### **4. The Changing Concept of “Audience” in the Digital Age**

Everything is changing, so is the concept of “audience”. The “magic bullet theory” has already been abandoned with the development of the human society (Zhu, 2004). People no longer believe that audience is the target, just waiting for the production of information and accept them passively as the producers wish. As for the concept regarding the audience as the “receiver”, the author still finds it impossible to agree, although “receiver” has been a much less unpleasant to hear than “target”, it still poorly reflects the real status of audience within the digital context in contemporary society. As has been mentioned earlier, Wilbur Schramm has regarded “audience” as the “receiver” in the simple sequential model of the mass communication process (source, channel, message receiver, effect) for a long time, and many people accept this theory for an equally long period of time. However, with a little more attention, it can be noticed that Schramm’s book *Process and effects of mass communication* was written and published in 1997, and we can obviously see that it has been 20 years from today since the publication of the book. The world is no longer the same as it was 20 years ago, and the world today is changing with full of new technologies, and new media. Old concept is outdated and it could no longer be applied to the new age. The concept of audience may be useful in the old times, but definitely not suitable in today’s world. Nowadays, the role of the audience has profoundly changed.

From McQuail’s perspective, the typical role that audience plays as passive listener, consumer, receiver, or target have ceased. Instead, the concept of audience will encompass any of the following: seeker; consultant; browser; respondent; interlocutor; or conversationalist (McQuail, 1997). New technologies invented for recording, storage, and replay of all kinds of media have increased the flexibility of media use and potentially free availability to audiences from management and control by the media organizations (McQuail, 1997). This provides conditions for audience to choose what to read and what to watch. As a result, “personalization” has thus emerged among audiences. Because people’s interests vary, different people have different choices to a wide range of media contents. Unlike the past when the limitation of information and undeveloped media technologies failed to address the wide variety of audience’s selections, current society, teemed with the overabundance of information, enables audience the freedom to choose whatever they want to read and watch in their leisure time, which has inevitably prompted the audience to be more active and selective. In the digital age, media consumers’ decisions about what to read, watch or share, taken as a whole, create the traffic of audiences that sustain the operation and development of media platforms and endows them meaning (Webster, 2014). In fact, audience has already been segmented with the development of the digital media. For one reason or another, audiences hunker down in enclaves of agreeable, like-minded media (Webster, 2014). Researchers at Harvard University argued that interoperable

technologies have introduced the most radical shift of media users from passive information consumers towards active information creators or reusers within the networked setting. When applied interoperable across media platforms, digital technologies enable media consumers the unprecedented manner to opine and express via content generation and information sharing (Palfrey and Gasser, 2012).

## **5. The Consciousness of Information Spreading**

From the analysis of the origin of communication, people have an instinct to spread information, and the eager to know the unknown. Moreover, citizens believe that they have the mission to report something, especially when faced with sensational news and groundbreaking events. With the interactive access to Internet, citizens can actualize their desire to participate in the journalism.

Stuart Hall also critiques the statement regarding audience as the passive receiver. Stuart Hall critiques the linearity, but support the new form of process: production-circulation-distribution/consumption-reproduction. He thinks that producers encode the information at the beginning, and then diffuse the encoded information to the audience. In the end, audience uses their own background information and their own knowledge to decode it. Hence, he believes that the audience is no longer the receiver, but instead, during in process of information encoding and decoding, they have already become the producer and play the role of reproducing information (Hall, 2001).

In their book *Audiences: sociological theory of performance and imagination*, Abercromble and Longhurst raised the Spectacle/Performance Paradigm (SPP). They hold the opinion that everyone is the audience either directly or indirectly, and at the same time, they are also the performer, which means that the role of content producer and the content receiver have been entwined. Almost everyone is the producer, and everyone is the audience at the same time (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 2003). Admittedly, techniques are irrevocably changing the nature of journalism, because they're enormously empowering what had been a mostly passive audience in the past. Audience in the digital age have been armed with easy-to-use Web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, and the online audiences have also been enabled with the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information. This turns readers into reporters, commentators and producers. OhmyNews.com, the most influential online news site in South Korea, attracts an estimated 2 million readers a day and produces its content from more than 26,000 registered citizen journalists, which means that 70%-80% news manuscripts were written by citizens (Bowman and Willis, 2003). Simply and evidently put, people really love to tell stories. Moreover, the emergence of new blogging platform such as weibo and wechat in China also allow and encourage the audiences to shift their identity from the passive information receiver to the active information producer. As the audiences, weibo users could easily post what they want to say on their personal page to report what they have seen, what they want to critique, and what they would like to express. What's more, users could also update their personal state, repost the content, and share a link with their followers, which offer them the feeling of being connected and bonded. All these methods of using weibo on the Internet has led to a radical change in the status of audience from a passive receiver in the past to an active information producer at present. For example, with respect to the heavy snow that caused most flight delays in Beijing airport, many people were trapped in the airport. Former GOOGLE President (China Zone), Li Kaifu, used Telecom 3G notebook to post a piece of message on weibo: "Beijing airport snow, flight delay 90 minutes." A few hours later, his computer powered off, Li Kaifu used his mobile phone to release information "waited for 12 hours, has been lack of food for 9 hours, lack of water 3 hours, and the air quality is very poor, even do not have the strength to complain about the employees." Until November 2th morning 1:13, Li Kaifu wrote "finally on the train home, but have no direct flight to Taipei, so in need to transit in Hong Kong. As a result, I spent 17 hours in total at the airport today." He used both his phone and computer to realize this real-time reporting of this incident.

## **6. Technology Makes Impossible Possible**

Not too long ago, the transmission of media content relies mostly on particular modes of distribution. If people want to read some news, they would need to walk to a newsstand or wait for the newspaper to be delivered at their door; if people want to watch a movie, they would have to go to the theater; if people feel like watching a TV program, they would have to walk home and wait patiently for the broadcast of the programme. However, the emergence of the powerful, interoperable digital media has easily torn down the walls between place and time (Webster, 2014). Nowadays, 90% of families in the U.S. have access to the Internet, which allows them to interconnect with each other on the internet anywhere their smart devices are attached to the networks. Internet users are now able to watch a movie trailer on their phones, order and pay for a downloaded “on-demand” film on their tablets, and recommend or tweet it to their friends on social media. Users can easily move from one platform to another along with all information digitalized to move together with them (Webster, 2014). The way people access and define media has shifted (Edwards, 2012). As reported by Columbia University on “postindustrial journalism”, “observing a world where the members of audience have become more than recipients of information, Jay Rosen, scholar of New York University, coined the phrase “The people Formerly Known as the Audience” to describe the ways through which previously quiescent groups of consumers had become creators and annotators who judges and conduits information” (Anderson, Bell and Shirky, 2012).

Admittedly, digital media provide people plenty of choices, hundreds of television networks, thousands of expensively produced movies and TV shows, and seemingly endless websites, videos and tweets. People will never worry about how to kill time. For instance, according to the statistical data, there are five hundred million of tweets released in one day on Tweeter, (Kim, 2013), and there are over one hundred million hours of new videos uploaded every minute (Youtube.com).

New media have turned audience more autonomous and blurred the line between spreader and receiver. As for social commentators, they are the “people formerly known as the audience” but now have seized the control (Webster, 2014). In the digital age, more and more people have been exposed to the Internet. Take China as an example, with the rapid and steady growth of internet penetration, China’s netizen population has exceeded 700 million. Up to June 2016, China has 710 million Internet users, a semi-annual increase by 21.32 million or 3.1% (CNNIC).

Supported by websites, audience communication platforms are becoming bigger and bigger. Almost all sites have opened up a blog and podcast channel for their users who want to use the internet to post, to express their feeling or to report something. What’s more, in order to improve the site's click-through rate, many sites will put some of the bloggers’ appealing and highly recommended content in their home page. Users are encouraged to click the blogs on the websites for further reading. Its zero-threshold allows for the rapid growth of the blog team. According to China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), among the 137 million Chinese Internet users, up to 25.3% users are heavy users of the blog service.

## **7. Equality and Freedom are the Goals that Human Beings Pursuing**

In ancient Greece, Socrates believed that communication was about love and being loved, and was identified as a two-way reciprocity (Peters, 2012). Although Socrates did not directly describe the concept of audience, his analysis of communication has deeply influenced the analysis with audiences of today, both spiritually and morally. If communication is more like a way of interaction, the audience is supposed to be respected and understood as the other side of communication, which is therefore identified with an equal role to the information sender. From the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the development of the human society is the process of pursuing freedom and equality (General Assembly resolution 217A). Therefore, in the realm of media and communication, the so-called “receivers” are supposed to have the equal right as the information producer. People should also pursue a free and equal relationship in communication. Receivers have the equal right and freedom to talk back with the sender. Human being has been moving closer to this goal unconsciously (Dickinson, Harindranath and Linné, 1998).

## 8. Conclusion

In the digital age, digital media and new technology have profoundly altered the way people think, live and how they use media. In the early times, there are only a few channels available for audience to choose from. In that circumstance, it was very difficult to be selective. The audience was once just a passive receiver. However, with the approaching of digital age, the old concept of audience is no longer exist. In direct contrast with the past, audiences now have their own choices, and they would not satisfy with the role of being just a watcher, they are eager to become the “storyteller”, playing the role of producing information themselves, and becoming the information producer. The concept of audience is not a fixed concept any more, and audience’s identity is changing rapidly: the line between information or content producer and the audience is becoming vaguer. On social media platforms, the audience may just be the watcher or receiver in the previous minute, but in the next minute, they could probably become the information producer or the information sender since the new technology provides them the new platform to alter their identity as quickly as they wish. Digital media experts Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman once said, “Choices have exploded, putting control of what people watch-and-where-in the hands of individuals. In summary, the old theory and old concept of “audience” do not fit in today’s digital age any longer (Rainie, Wellman and Marinelli, 2012).

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