

Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies

A New COST Network

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If any one issue has occupied the field of media and communication research, it is that of effects: what do media do to people and, in Elihu Katz's (1959) supplementary formulation, what do people do with media? Throughout the first half-century of its existence, the field has debated the nature of 'effects' and the appropriate methodologies for studying them. In a Nordic perspective, the rise of reception analysis from the 1980s onwards marked the beginning, both a resurgence of qualitative audience studies and of debates concerning their relationship with quantitative research – as contrasts or complements, in administrative and/or critical work (Lazarsfeld, 1941).

With the emergence of digital media and the ongoing digitalization of the media environment as such, audience research faces fundamental challenges, including the definition of its very object of analysis – 'audiences.' Are we an audience when reading a Twitter feed or commenting on a YouTube video? While it is easy to exaggerate the implications of 'user-driven' communication and 'social' media, new flows of one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication across different media types and social contexts call for a reassessment of classic concepts and models (Jensen, 2010).

A new European research network – Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies – takes up some of the resulting challenges through a range of activities during the period 2010-2014, involving thirty European countries. The network is a so called COST Action – a research initiative in the context of the Seventh Framework Program of the European Union (FP7). Here, funding is available for workshops, conferences, short-term exchanges, etc., but not for research projects as such. Instead, Actions serve as a framework in which to collaborate on the development of new projects, and to apply for funding from additional sources.

The present Action can be summarized, first, in terms of the tasks to be accomplished and, second, with reference to the four working groups that have been established.

Tasks

1. *Review.* A critical overview of existing and emerging research. The aim to advance focused and high-quality studies in the area, including collaborative work with other COST and European projects and networks.
2. *Agenda.* The formulation of a concerted research agenda. In addition to academic research perspectives, the agenda will address the concerns of other stakeholders, such as policy makers, creative industries, and civil-society organizations.
3. *Consolidation.* An integration of findings and insights from international research, so as to produce a broad and substantial account of the role of media audiences in contemporary culture and society.
4. *Theory development.* Given ongoing changes in the European and global media environment, there is a special call for a reassessment of theoretical frameworks and models, and for the development of new methodological resources.
5. *Recommendations.* Based on its empirical findings and theoretical insights, the Action will offer recommendations addressed to media practitioners, legislators, and research administrators.

Working Groups

WG 1 “New media genres, media literacy, and trust in the media”

The first working group takes up a key issue regarding the general public’s relationship with (new) media: how to understand, and whether the trust, the information being offered on a growing variety of media platforms? The classic question of media literacy has taken on added importance in a setting where more organizations and individuals are in a position to communicate to – or with – others, in matters with potentially significant political, economic, and cultural consequences.

WG 2 “Audience interactivity and participation”

The second working group addresses another issue concerning the wider social implications of new media and communicative practices: whether and how audiences are enabled and empowered to participate in deliberations about the ends and means of the society they share. Interactivity at the interface may, or may not, facilitate interaction and engagement in other social contexts, beyond the interface. Can audiences become not only active media users, but active citizens?

WG 3 “The role of media and ICT use for evolving social relationships”

The third working group is devoted specifically to the study of new, digital information and communication technologies (ICT) and their implications for changing forms of social organization and interaction. As far as citizens, media, and other social institutions

are concerned, how does a network society operate in everyday communicative practices (Castells, 1996, 2009)? This WG also explores new methodologies for analyzing the flows of information in widely distributed communication networks.

WG 4 “Audience transformations and social integration”

The fourth and final working group examines the further implications of media for sustaining social relationships, sharing knowledge and culture, and cultivating collective identities. Amid technological and institutional changes, traditional social categories – class, gender, age, ethnicity – continue to condition and frame communication, as it feeds into imagined communities (Anderson, 1991), including ‘virtual’ communities that are, nevertheless, real.

Activities and Output

In addition to Action workshops and conferences, the Working Groups will organize sessions at international conferences such as ECREA, IAMCR, and ICA. Young scholars will also gain access to ECREA Summer Schools.

The dissemination of findings and insights will include proceedings from Action conferences, edited books, themed issues of international and peer-reviewed journals, as well as web essays and research reports.

More and updated information, including data on participants and officers in the Action, is available here, http://w3.cost.esf.org/index.php?id=233&action_number=IS0906

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