Crisis? What Crisis?

Analysing Audience Studies

BO REIMER

Audience studies is without a doubt one of the most lively subfields within media and communication research. This has been the case for more than a decade. An interesting aspect of the field is that it is relatively *communicative*. Within the field, researchers from the social sciences and the humanities actually tend to speak to, and learn from, each other, even though research objectives and methodologies may differ. The meetings are not always productive, and obviously not everyone is as communicative, but all in all, the dynamic character of the field makes it one of the most exciting ones within media and communication research presently.

However, even though the field has evolved, and continues to do so, it is to a certain extent caught up in what Stuart Hall (1989) has termed a crisis within the dominant paradigm in communication studies; a crisis with both internal and external dimensions. I will in this paper discuss the ways in which this crisis affects audience studies. I will argue that we at this stage either know less about audiences than we think we do, or less than we care to admit. In the discussion I will focus not only upon the dominant paradigm but also upon its main critical alternative, and I will argue for an increasing attention to the question of contextualization as well as for a move towards modernity theory.[1]

The Field of Audience Research

The history of the field – or, more correctly, the subfield – of audience studies has been written at numerous occasions and needs not be repeated in any detail here (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990; Moores, 1993; Reimer 1994: ch. 3). Suffice it to say that a commonly accepted picture is that audience studies was dominated by the social science tradition of Uses and Gratifications until about 15-

20 years ago, when it was challenged by the more humanistic, and, in the traditions' own word, more critical, approaches of reception analysis and media ethnography, (the difference between these two being that reception analysis focuses on texts, whereas media ethnography focuses on the whole context within which media use is taking place).[2] Taken together, this has meant that audience research today has become more qualitative and more humanistic in character, and that focus has shifted from an interest in generalizable results to more historically specific studies, in which people's more or less unique interpretations of media texts (reception analysis), or the actual contexts of media consumption (media ethnography), have been the primary objects of analysis.

This qualitative turn, which of course in no ways is unique for audience studies, has shaken up the field. There are now two strong traditions conducting research with more or less similar objectives.

On the one hand, these two traditions continue to evolve independently of each other. That is, there are researchers committed to their respective tradition that do not come into contact with the 'other' tradition. Some Uses and Gratifications articles in the journal *Communication Research*, and some reception analysis/media ethnography articles in the journal *Cultural Studies*, would fit that description, for instance.

But, as outlined above, there are also researchers moving *between* the traditions, creating a rather unstable field in which it is not as easy as before to determine who your friends – or your enemies – are. Dividing lines that before were fairly stable, with commitments either to a social science ideal, with quantitative analyses, an interest in generalization and a liberal political outlook, or to a humanities ideal, with qualitative analyses, an inter-

est in the unique, and a radical political outlook, are not stable any longer. More and more researchers have become eclectic, moving in-between traditions and methods, creating a 'blurred genre' (Geertz, 1983; Schrøder, 1987).

But what, then, is the problem with contemporary audience research? Is there a crisis? First of all, the qualitative turn, and the movements within the field, has without a doubt been immensely important for our knowledge about audiences. There is no question about that. But I would argue that we know less about audiences today than we think we do – or at least less than we say we do.

First, even though audience research by definition should deal with different kinds of media, and with different kinds of media genres, it is quite obvious that the last decade of studies has been devoted primarily to television, and especially to the fiction output on television. This is no to say that the focus exclusively has been on fiction on television, but that has been the prime object of study.

There are many reasons behind this. The television focus is partly due to the strong standing of television in American culture, and on the strong standing of American research in the international research community. In other countries, more research has been devoted to other media, but in the international journals, the American influence is strong.

The focus on fiction has to be seen partly as a reaction against an earlier focus on news and other 'important' genres, as characterised by (male) social scientists. Focusing on fiction is thus a way of taking media practices more typical of women – soap operas, romance books – seriously. But it also has to do with the characteristics of fiction as genre. In contemporary audience research, the different ways that people can interpret the same text is an important object of study, and in conducting such studies, fiction has been regarded as a suitable genre to study, since it is more open to different interpretations than are factual programs such as news.

Second, even disregarding the narrow focus on television and fiction, the cumulativity that we should expect, given the large numbers of studies conducted during the last decades, is not there. This is true both for the quantitative and qualitative traditions, albeit for different reasons.

When it comes to the quantitative Uses and Gratifications tradition, a tradition explicitly devoted to cumulativity and to generalizability, it is somewhat ironic to realise that even though most articles carry references to a number of key theoretical overviews, such as the introductory chapters to the two main Uses and Gratifications anthologies (Blumler and Katz, 1974; Rosengren et al, 1985), very few articles seem to build on previously conducted empirical work. That is, most researchers seem to prefer conducting their own surveys with their own specific questions rather than building on earlier research. Possibilities for analysing changes over time, or differences between nations, are therefore small.

Within the qualitative camp, the situation is quite different. Here it seems much more common to discuss in detail the empirical work carried out earlier. The work by Ang (1985), Morley (1986), Radway (1987), Lull (1990) and others are discussed time and time again. However, in many cases it seems as if discussing other people's research is in itself enough. The amount of new empirical, qualitative research being published is not overwhelming.

Third, although there are researchers trying to work eclectically, there is a gap between what could be termed a micro and a macro approach to audience research. This gap is on the one hand concrete. Some researchers work on a micro level, some on a macro level, and very few on both levels. But there is also a gap in the sense that there is disagreement over which level is the most fruitful to conduct research on – even when research interests coincide. This is particularly clear in relation to questions of power, ideology and economy, where proponents of a macro perspective on the media argue that much of today's audience research, in its focus on micro contexts, and on the different meanings people may make out of, for instance, Baywatch, totally neglects such questions (Corner, 1991; Seaman, 1992).

I will return to the relationship between the micro and the macro later on in this article. The point I want to make at this stage is that, even though there are researchers taking the micro/macro problematic seriously and constructively (cf. Morley, 1992; Lull, 1995; Livingstone, in press), at the moment there does not seem to be any consensus on how to deal with the problematic. And for too many researchers, the problematic is not deemed important enough to deal with at all.

Stuart Hall and the Crisis of the Communication Paradigm

In an influential article published in 1989, Stuart Hall argued that the dominant paradigm of media and communication research – the social science

paradigm – was in crisis. This crisis had both an internal and an external dimension.

The internal dimension had to with the paradigm's epistemological and theoretical weaknesses. The main weaknesses, as Hall saw it, were the crude *behaviourism* of the paradigm, and its *individualism*. Even though we know how complex matters having to do with signification, meaning and language are, and even though we know that human beings are primarily social beings, belonging in concrete social and cultural contexts, the dominant paradigm still continued to reduce these matters to simple indicators, and to questions of individual choice.

The external dimension had to do with the dominant paradigm's attempts to constitute media and communication research as a self-sustaining discipline; a discipline with its own theories and with its own empirical objects of analysis. The problem with this, Hall argued, is that communication is not, and can never be, a discipline. It is a regional field, related to other fields, both theoretically and empirically:

First, in understand to understand communication, theories about communication can never suffice in themselves. The only way to theorise meaningfully about communication is to relate such theories to, and to ground them in, more general social theories of the social formation as a whole, since it is within this framework that communication works.

And second, it is not only theoretically that communication has to be grounded in a larger context. This is also true empirically. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to conceptualise of communication practices as external to social structures and to other kinds of everyday life practices. Communication practices are related to other practices, and, Hall argued, it is increasingly the case that it is communication institutions and practices that actually constitute the social field. It is through communications we make sense of the world. It is therefore unthinkable that we should try to understand communication practices outside this world.

Hall's critique of the dominant paradigm of media and communication research was harsh. It is not self-evident that many members of this paradigm would agree with the picture Hall painted of the paradigm (and especially not with his views on the behaviourism of the paradigm). However, I believe that many of the points made were valid, and I believe that by discussing them in relation to today's field of audience studies, it may be possible both to identify some of the field's more basic

shortcomings, and to arrive at some suggestions concerning how to proceed within – or maybe even beyond – the field. I furthermore believe that the critique can be raised and applied to the whole field. That is, the critique raises questions that are valid not only in relation to the dominant but also to the alternative paradigm within audience studies (if 'dominant' and 'alternative' are reasonable terms within this field).

Individualism and the Lack of Contextualization

In Hall's critique of the dominant paradigm's internal problem, a key aspect concerned its inherent individualism. People are treated as autonomous, strong individuals, making rational decisions outside of social and cultural contexts, even though we know this is not the way people 'are' or act. This individualism is of course typical not only of the dominant paradigm within media and communication studies. It is basically the view of the individual that dominates social science in general – which in turn is related to the ideology of Western capitalist societies.

Within the field of communication studies, it is interesting to realise, however, that it is within the Uses and Gratifications tradition that this individualism has been most visible. The media effects tradition, which was challenged initially by the Uses and Gratifications traditions in the 1940s, and more strongly in the 1960s, is in many ways at odds with the notion of individualism. That tradition's view of the individual can be seen as more negative: people will react more or less similarly on a message transmitted to them. Or it could be seen as more sociologically grounded: people live in different surroundings and have different socially and culturally based competencies. Some are able to 'resist' messages, some are not.

For the Uses and Gratifications tradition, on the other hand, the ways that people handle different messages fall back upon their specific needs and motives. People are able to identify their specific needs, and they use the media in order to satisfy them. This is individualism in a pure form. It is a view that completely ignores the notion of *contextualization*.

It is not difficult to identify the above discussed weakness within the Uses and Gratification tradition. The tradition takes the strong, rational individual as its point of departure, and that perspective is furthermore made concrete through the choice of research methods. The traditional way of

proceeding within the tradition is to conduct large-scale surveys, in which people are asked about their needs and their motives for using the media. By so doing, the unit of analysis is obviously the lone individual, and the way of understanding his or her actions and motives is by asking him or her standardised questions, without meeting the person in question. The social and cultural context within which he or she lives can thus only be grasped through questions in the survey, and such questions are in themselves rare.

It would seem as if the above stated problem should not be a problem at all for researchers working within reception analysis or media ethnography. In both cases, the researchers meet the people they are interested in, they ask questions in person, and at least for media ethnography, they even visit people in their homes. The unit of analysis can even be the family rather than the individual. So can there really be a problem of individualism here?

I say yes. There is a problem, but it is on another level. Within the Uses and Gratifications tradition, each person is treated like a context-free, specific individual; an individual whose actions and needs can be understood without taking into account the context he or she belongs within. Within reception analysis, and specifically media ethnography, the context definitely matters. But the problem is that *each context is treated as if that context does not belong within a context in itself*. What the traditions do not take into account strongly enough is that each specific context is positioned within a larger structure, and that it is shaped by its position in that structure. That is, each context is treated like it is autonomous, without relation to other contexts. But if we are to understand the goings on in different, specific contexts, then we have to take into account two things:

First, people do not wind up in different contexts by accident. They do so depending on a number of factors having to do both with social and cultural background, and with current conditions. The composition of each specific context is therefore not random.

Second, the meanings of each specific context is shaped by its position within the larger structure of social space. Thus, it is not enough to ground people's actions in their everyday life micro-contexts, it is also necessary to take into account the macro-structures shaping those contexts.

In these senses reception analysis and media ethnography have a highly individualised view of contexts. The contexts are not contextualized (cf. Reimer, 1997b).

Media Practices and the Everyday Life Context

The distinction between an internal and external dimension, as used by Hall, is of course not clear cut. To a certain extent, they overlap. Thus, when we now move to a discussion of external factors, this will be a continuation of the discussion in the previous section.

I have already argued that contexualization is important when trying to understand why people use the media the way they do. This is also what Hall argues when he writes that media and communication practices cannot be understood outside the social or the cultural. When it comes to audience research, this means that people's media practices must be related also to other everyday life practices. Media practices differ from other everyday life practices to the extent that they are mediated, of course, but they belong within the same context, and the choice of watching television, for instance, is made in relation not only to the alternative of listening to the radio but also to the alternative of going for a walk, for instance. It is furthermore the case that the meaning of a person's media practices is also related to other everyday life practices. The choices a person makes in everyday life are deliberate, even though often made routinely, and taken together they express something about who the person is and who he or she wants to be.

The tradition within audience research that has taken this kind of contextualization most seriously is of course media ethnography, where the debate has concerned whether it is altogether meaningful to start with a person's media practices and then try to contextualize them, or whether it is necessary to instead start with the context, and then try to understand the role played by the media practices within that context (Drotner, 1993).

It should be remembered, however, that also researchers working quantitatively increasingly have tried to position media practices within a larger everyday life context. This has been carried out with the help of the *lifestyle* concept. In surveys, respondents have been asked questions not only about media use, but also about other leisure activities – this in order to get an understanding of how people combine media practices with other leisure practices, and of how these practices together make up a person's lifestyle (Johansson and Miegel, 1992; Reimer, 1994).[3]

It would seem as if the procedure of treating media practices in relation to everyday life practices is rapidly becoming a 'natural' way of pro-

ceeding, both within the social sciences and the humanities paradigm. This may not come as a great surprise, given, as Hall argues, the important role played by the media in everyday life today. The distinction between mediated and interpersonal communication is becoming more and more difficult to uphold in a meaningful manner, and the introduction of increasingly sophisticated new media also tend to render the distinction if not obsolete, so at least less important.

However, describing in detail what a person's living room looks like, or showing empirically that there are a number of relationships between, for instance, the viewing of certain TV programs and certain outdoor activities is not particularly meaningful in itself. Those patterns must be interpreted in relation to a theoretical perspective.[4] That leads us over to the third and final of Hall's problematics.

Theorising Audiences

In order to understand why people use the media the way they do, it is of course necessary to have a knowledge of factors and processes that are specific for the mass media and for mass communication processes. It is in this respect necessary to take into account theories concerning the cultural forms of different media (Williams, 1974) as well as theories concerning genre (Neale, 1990). It is also necessary to take into account theories concerning the actual process of interpreting or decoding a text (Hall, 1980).[5]

But, as Hall argues, media and communications is not a self-sustaining discipline. As a regional field, its progress is to a great extent shaped by progress within social theory as a whole. Media and communications can only be properly understood with the help of theories that take into account media and communications' place within the larger social formation, and even though such theories of course can be formulated by media theorists, it is also necessary to be aware of what is happening within other regions of social analysis.

Today, the most vital debate within social analysis is carried out within a *modernity* framework. Within this framework, theorists try to overcome a number of difficult oppositions in social analysis: First, the opposition between constancy and change. Second, the opposition between generality and specificity. And third, the opposition between structure and agency (Reimer, 1994: ch. 2).

The way to handle these oppositions is to focus on how contemporary Western societies are forever changing in an interplay between macro processes and people's actions and reactions on these processes. In order to understand this interplay, it is necessary, first, to be historically specific: Western societies have many things in common, but the processes of modernity that are under way look different in different cultures. Second, it is necessary to acknowledge that the processes of modernity are ambiguous. There are many different processes under way – economic, political, social, technological and cultural – and these processes do not all go hand in hand. It is not possible to reduce these processes to one, common underlying factor, either (such as the economy). Instead, the different factors are related to each other in historically specific situations, and in these situations, the relationships may be articulated quite differently (Hall and Gieben, 1992).

Modernity is shaped by many macro processes, including industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation, democratisation and globalisation. But obviously also the mass media (in this discourse named, rather awkwardly, mediazation) have played an important role in the shaping of contemporary societies – a role that furthermore without a doubt is becoming increasingly important. Given this situation, it is somewhat remarkable to note that in the writings of the major modernity theorists – Habermas (1990), Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) – the mass media are mentioned here and there, but they are very seldom treated in detail.[6]

Although few modernity theorists have devoted much time to the mass media, it seems obvious that the modernity perspective can be made useful for analyses of the media. This is something more and more researchers within the field of media and communications seem to agree upon. Media analyses written within a modernity perspective is becoming increasingly common (Drotner, 1992; Reimer, 1994; Fornäs, 1995; Moores, 1995).

This is not to say that the modernity perspective is present in media studies everywhere. It is at most an alternative perspective, a perspective that may be used, not a perspective that everyone feels they have to take into account. This is also the case within audience studies. I believe, however, that there are very good reasons for applying such a framework. Four specific reasons can be identified:

First, the emphasis on *historical specificity*, in relation to the notion of non-necessary relationships, is a crucial starting point. Particularly the social sciences version of audience studies has been too interested in finding universal, generalizable patterns in audience behaviour. One problem with this procedure, as discussed earlier, is that it seems

very difficult to empirically identify such patterns. Another problem is that such patterns, when identified, are raised to such a level of abstraction that the generalizations become practically meaningless. This latter problem within the social sciences paradigm is to a certain extent shared by the alternative paradigm, when summary statements of the kind that 'different people interpret similar texts differently' are made.

Second, I briefly discussed the *micro-macro* problematic earlier. This is of course not an easy problematic, but it is a problematic that cannot be left unattended to. Has the focus on micro studies meant that power and ideology have been replaced by less 'important' topics, such as pleasure? The critique is valid in the sense that in much of today's micro analyses there does not seem to be an interest in macro structures and proper contextualizations. However, this has more to do with the way micro analyses are carried out than with the focus on the micro in itself. Morley (1992) is surely correct in arguing that it is quite unproductive to put the micro against the macro as an either/or question. It is through micro processes that the macro constantly – daily – is reproduced, and in order to reach a proper understanding of macro processes, it is necessary to integrate analyses of power and ideology with everyday life analyses. Such an emphasis is central within the modernity perspective.

Third, in making analyses historically specific, and in focusing to a great extent on contemporary societies, the *local-global* connection has increasingly come into focus. Of central importance here is the notion of changing relationships between time and space, of how, through processes of time-space compression (Harvey, 1989), or time-space distanciation (Giddens, 1991) the world is shrinking and our relationships to other people no longer are confined to physical, immediate settings. The mass media are obviously heavily involved in these processes, and it is with the help of the media (television, radio, but increasingly also the Internet) that people's social and cultural contexts are changing.

And fourth, although the modernity perspective in a way is a macro perspective, it still theorises micro processes, and it uses the concept of *cultural identity* in order to meaningfully grasp human thinking and action. With cultural identity is meant that people's identities have to be seen, first, as socially rather than as individually grounded. Identity is shaped in social interaction. And second, this identity is complex, it is unstable, and to a certain extent contradictory (Hall, 1992). In one way, it could be argued that people's identities always

have been like this, but it is quite likely that such a view of identity is more relevant in a complex, late modern society than in a traditional society. It is furthermore a view of identity that is relevant to apply in audience studies. Which parts of a person's identity comes to the fore in front of the TV, and in relation to which programs?

Concluding Remarks

I have in this paper discussed contemporary audience studies from the viewpoint of Stuart Hall's critique of the dominant paradigm within media and communications. The objective has been to identify weaknesses and problems with the tradition, and to see if Hall's ideas may be used productively. In so doing, I have focused not only upon the dominant but also upon the alternative paradigm within audience studies.

What can then be said about the state of the field? First of all, it is obvious that the field of audience studies is quite heterogeneous, and that any critique raised in this or any other article does not affect everyone involved. But even so, I believe that the points raised by Hall are valid when looking more specifically into audience studies, and I believe the crisis affects both the dominant and the alternative paradigm.

I outlined initially some of the shortcomings of the work carried out. We do have 'knowledge' of audience behaviour in the sense that we know from work within the dominant paradigm that media practices are related to a number of socio-cultural and economic factors such as age, income, education and gender. We also know from this paradigm that psychological properties are of some importance (disregarding at this stage the relationship between these factors and properties). We furthermore know from the alternative paradigm that media interpretations are highly varied, and that the micro-context within which media use is carried out is important in order to understand the meanings of said use.

But where do we go from there? It is at this point it becomes necessary to integrate micro and macro studies with each other, to integrate media practices with other everyday life practices, and to make sense of these processes with the help of relevant theories – theories that I believe should be drawn from the modernity discourse. This is of course not an easy task, but it is a task that more and more media and communications – and cultural studies – researchers seem to think it is worth pursuing.

It should be noted, and taken seriously, that pursuing such a task will have a number of consequences, all of which may not be attractive or easy to deal with. It may mean having to set more modest, albeit more meaningful, goals with the practice of audience studies; specifying more clearly the limitations of what we are trying to accomplish (Reimer, 1997b).

But it may also mean winding up in a position in which the whole discipline of media and communications can be questioned: If we move closer to social theory and everyday life analysis in general, what is the point of studying media and communications specifically? Why not just conduct cultural analysis in general? The task here will be to overcome the problematic distinction between specificity and generality. It will be necessary to argue convincingly for the need for understanding the specific in order to understand the general.

It is to the modernity discourse we may have to turn in order to find our arguments.

Notes

1. This paper is a result of work carried out within the research project 'Cultural Identities in Transition', a project financed by The Swedish Research Council of the Humanities and the Social Sciences. For a presentation of the project, cf. Reimer 1997a. For empirical analyses carried out within the project, cf. Andersson and Jansson 1997. I want to thank James Lull for valuable comments on an earlier version of this article.

2. These distinctions are of course not the only ones possible. Jensen and Rosengren (1990) argue for five separate traditions (including, somewhat peculiarly, the media effects tradition), whereas McQuail in the textbook *Mass Communication Theory* (1994) beside a behaviourist and a social-cultural tradition (roughly the social sciences and the humanities distinction used in this paper) adds a structural tradition typical of research within the media industry itself. Although obviously conducting audience research, the aims of the media industry tradition is so different from the aims of the academic traditions that it would not be meaningful to discuss that tradition in this context.

3. The concept of lifestyle has also been used within media studies in order to predict media use. That is, a person's lifestyle has been used to predict his or her media use (Donohew et al, 1987). The theoretical problem with such a procedure is of course that it is difficult so see how one can meaningfully distinguish a person's media practices from his or her other everyday life practices, and use one type of practices as independent variable, one type as dependent variable.

4. The social science traditions dealing with lifestyles are painfully undertheorised. Cf. Reimer 1995.

5. Whether it is also necessary to take into account factors having to do with the production of media is a question I will side-step in this article.

6. One major exception is of course Habermas' early work *'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere'* (1962/1989), but the analysis of the media in that book has not exactly been applauded, and Habermas has subsequently (1992) revised his views. For a more thorough analysis of the media from the position of social theory, cf. Thompson 1995.

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