

## **MEDIA AUDIENCE EMERGENCE AS FORCES TO BE RECKONED WITH IN THE INTERNET AGE**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to examine the traditional concept of the audience as mere listeners, viewers or readers of mass media content in the light of the advent of the New media which has given them new and multiple roles in the communication process and the role of the mass media as a one-time all-powerful information purveyor — both of which is undergoing tremendous changes in the digital age. The multiplication of media channels and sources has reorganized the audience configuration—along-time collective term for the receivers in the simple sequential model of the mass communication process—source-channel-message-receiver-effect-feedback and the media and communication industry have witnessed an irreversible revolution as it has to do with the nature and behaviour of the mass media audience occasioned by the digital age. Therefore, employing causal explanatory research design, while using literature review as a research instrument; this paper examined the changing roles of the media audience, beginning from the Mass Society, Hypodermic Needle and Magic Bullet research era to the ongoing User-generated content, mass involvement, citizens journalism revolution. The paper put forward that since the audience, having been empowered by the New media to free itself from the earlier 'manipulative' influence of the traditional media have assumed the role of content creators—the time is now ripe for scholars and researchers in the field of media and communication studies to reappraise the audience configuration and continue the design and redesign of new models of communication to put the audience in the digital age in proper perspective.*

**Keywords: Media Audience, Citizens Journalism, Internet Age, Audience Behaviour, Media Access.**

### **Introduction**

The media and communication field have witnessed an irreversible revolution as it has to do with the nature and behaviour of the mass media audience occasioned by the digital age. The traditional concept of the audience as mere listeners, viewers or readers of mass media content no longer hold as the multiplication of media channels and sources has reorganized audience configuration—a long-time collective term for the receivers in the simple sequential model of the mass communication process—source-channel-message-receiver-effect-feedback. The advent of the New media has given the audience new and multiple roles—and the communication process is now witnessing 'reverse communication'.

The role of the mass media as a one-time all-powerful information purveyor and the audience: a mere docile, feeble and nonchalant consumer is undergoing tremendous changes in the digital age. In their book *Media and Audiences: New Perspectives*, Karen & Nightingale (2003), asserts that the word audience is an inevitable part of our daily conversation and that its complexity is often axiomatic. Audience in media research is mostly referred to as individuals or groups of people, like the mass audience for an Internet post, television news, newspaper readership etc. According to Karen & Nightingale, the word audience is also used to refer to groups of people who are linked by ties of more enduring socio-cultural significance—may be construed "as subcultures, taste cultures, fan cultures, ethnic diasporas, indigenous or religious communities, and even domestic households." The scholars stated that members of these groups bring certain shared interpretative perspectives to their engagements with the media and so are perhaps better described as formations rather than masses. Such formations are formed by pre-existing social and cultural histories and conditions and at other times, by a sense of shared interests which motivates them to continually use particular media vehicles. Most importantly, the twin concept of time and space is essential when defining the audience. In Mass communication, it is said that messages are simultaneously transmitted to audiences who are spatially separated. Access to the Internet in the digital age has created virtual spaces where the audience now congregates. These meetings are in time but separated by virtual space. Even two individuals engaging in a chat room discussion with several others may be sitting beside each other, but are still virtually separated. The millions of netizens who congregates gaming communities, web-chat sites and sundry cyberspace activities are new members of the audience configuration. Though recent efforts are geared towards bridging the spatial interval among the audience, especially online,—Facebook recently launched its ambitious virtual reality platform—Metaverse. Like the physical universe we dwell in, Facebook founder and the brain behind Meta, Mark Zuckerberg, submitted that the vision of the Metaverse as the successor to the mobile Internet and headlined by Horizon Home—the first thing you witness as you put on the Quest headset, the device that ushers users into Metaverse—is a set of interconnected digital spaces that lets users experience things they are unable to attempt in the physical world. Mark pronounced that the most important aspect of the novel idea is that users' experience will be characterized by the social presence—the feeling of being near another person no matter where both of you may have logged in to Meta—from any parts of the world (Tech@facebook, 2021).

Considering media audiences, and communication, the mediatization of information is often assumed to encompass the power and control dimensions of the media event. However, as the complexity of the media environment continues to expand and the diversity of audience engagements increases, it is expedient to reevaluate such assumptions, and expand the definitions of the media audience's term, especially in the Internet age. In the words of Arowolo (2017), the audience is one of the central elements of media studies: "Yet, the term connotes different, sometimes contradictory things. Media and mass communication scholars have over time focused on studying the dynamic landscape of media and audience studies." Denis McQuail in his 1997 book: *Audience Analysis*, said that the "audience" has long been familiar as the collective term for the receivers in the simple sequential model of the mass communication process (source, channel, message, receiver, effect) that was deployed by pioneers in the field of media research" (McQuail, 1997, p.1). He suggests that conceptualising the audience within the linear model can be problematic due to the audience fluctuating abstract characters. As a result, prominent media researchers (Morley, 1980; Park, 1982;

Livingstone, 2003; Napoli, 2003; Oso & Bello, 2012) have raised questions about whether the concept of 'audience' is still a useful one as it used to be.

In Oso and Semiu's *Conceptualising Media Audience: Contextual and Contrasting Perspectives*, the authors argued that "intensive scholarship and exploration of the literature on media studies and mass communication research axiomatically shows that media effect is a corollary to audience theories" (Oso & Semiu, 2012). Meanwhile, Sonia Livingstone in *The changing nature of Audiences: From the mass audience to the interactive media user* argues that "things move fast in audience studies" (Livingstone, 2003). This fast-changing nature of the media audience according to the author informed the changing nature of media audience research. Perhaps this is what informed Oso and Semiu (2012) to metaphorically refer to audience behaviour as a swinging pendulum. In their words, "the swinging pendulum of audience theory is underpinned by a historical shift in media effect research (Oso & Semiu, 2012, p. 229). This underlying nature of the concept by the historical shift in audiences' nature tallies with Livingstone's proposition in her study that "audience research requires a historical lens" and "that if research adopts a longer historical lens, we may begin to position our present themes of the audience with an actual audience, past and future" (Livingstone, 2003).

Communication scholar McQuail (2010), has questioned the continued hang-on to the designation of media 'audience', while positing that over the years, changes and multiplication of communication channels have influenced, directly or indirectly, the traditional definition of what the audience is. He said, "Sufficient reasons have been given to wonder whether the term 'audience' is still a useful one, especially as there are so many kinds of use of many different media. (McQuail, 2010). Arowolo (2017) has also argued that it can be construed from McQuail's comments that audience as a concept cannot be disassociated from its foundational meaning, even though emerging media platforms are eroding and reshaping audience in the strictest conformist sense. By conformist sense, Arowolo meant the traditional exposition by pioneer scholars in the field of media and communication study as captured by Wilbur Schramm under the title, *Information theory and mass communication* which explains the communication process in a simple sequential linear model.

McQuail reasoned that "these stem mainly from the fact that a single word is being applied to an increasingly diverse and complex reality, open to alternative and competing formulations". His exposition is hinged on the fact that audience as a concept by the virtue of expanding media platforms along with increasing multimedia channels, is having changes in its traditional denotative meaning as mere spectators, listeners and consumers of media content. Elucidating further, Oso (2017), said that the conception of the media audience took its foundation in the period of Mass Society, Hypodermic Needle and Bullet Proof theory when it was believed that the power of the mass media was all-encompassing. He observed that the "period was based on fear of deleterious effect of the mass media on a weak, toothless, isolated, atomistic and passive mass of people" (Oso, 2017).

### **Information Age: The Audience Now**

At the turn of the century when the emerging information and digital age begin the redefinition of people's everyday life, the research into media audiences began to take on renewed interest and importance. Ross & Nightingale (2003), said this is not just because more information is mediated, but that it is occasioned by people integrating both old and new

media technologies into their everyday activities in much more complex ways—a form of convergence at the audience's level. In addition, earlier on in his treatise on the flow of television programming, Williams (1990), noted the demands made of viewers by the pace and rhythm of the incessant flow of diverse and sometimes discordant television programme fragments (what is today referred to in the digital age as information overload) was overwhelming. William said:

Today, being an audience is even more complicated. The media 'environment' is much more cluttered. Where once there was one television set and one radio in the average home, there are now several of each. Where once listening and viewing were group activities in the home, now individual listening and viewing is the domestic norm, with people sometimes using several different media simultaneously. It is not unusual today to find people reading a newspaper, book or magazine while listening to the radio or the latest MP3 track, or putting the latest interactive game on hold to take a call by mobile phone from a friend.

Digital technologies have enabled convergence, assisted by Internet access and the future that William talked about—streaming technologies for web radio and web television is already here. The audience in this era actively adds complexity, aided by technology to the range of information they consume by mixing media, media sources and media activities. It is without a doubt that the concept of media audience has seen rapid and dramatic fluctuation and expansion if juxtaposition is made of the current media environment with the traditional construct of the audience as spectators present at a performance in a theatre or a concert—glaring dichotomy can be observed.

The range, frequency, and closeness of media engagements that link people to information that are the life-blood of the information society have been enhanced by the proliferation of new technologies: the confluence of 'old' and 'new' media technologies and the globalization of communication surroundings (Ross & Nightingale, 2003). Independently and together, new technologies, globalization and confluence produce new openings for people to pierce information—and these pose significant challenges for contemporary understandings of media audiences and the significance of their conditioning. Evidence of the type of impact this change has had on what counts as followership exertion was demonstrated by the emergence in the 1990s of reality Television and have continued to command attention and interest even in this age.

### **The Liberal versus the Critical Schools of Thought**

In the continuing discourse of the nature and rudiments inherent in mass media audience, there have been two distinct schools of thought—the Liberal versus the Critical. Livingstone (2005 in Davies, 2008) postulates that:

the liberal or pluralist discourse locates the audience within the development of Western industrialised society, arguing that the media must reach the citizens—in their role as audiences—if they are to gain the information, understanding and shared cultural values required to sustain the informed consent that underpins democratic governance.

Livingstone's position is premised on the fact that even if such democratic views are achievable; can the audience be trusted to take safe, rational decisions when confronted with media content and can the media be trusted to provide fair or balanced information, especially in the era of digital information overload and disinformation?

The stepping stone for the Critical/radical scholars is the doubts alienated by the liberal discourse according to Livingstone. The Critical/radical scholars picture the audiences as consumers rather than citizens while describing them as the "managed subject of powerful institutional interests, vulnerable to political manipulation and commercial exploitation by the culture industries through subtle and pervasive strategies of mass communication. "Even from this postulation, ostensibly hinged on Mass Society mindset, are obvious signs of uncertainties, which subsequent audience research such as Uses and gratifications tried to remedy. In the ensuing debate, Livingstone's counter poser was: "can the population be castigated so contemptuously for its apparently naïve, pleasure-seeking, herd-like behaviour, and is there no defence of the media?"

### **Changing Nature of the Audience: Factors Responsible**

Again, Arowolo, (2017) cited Livingstone, (2005) as saying that the history of the audience is one of continuities and discontinuities. While debates on the shifting environment of media audience continue and researchers are now realizing factors responsible for the swinging pendulum; Arowolo also mentioned Ifeoma Amobi to have stated that "radical political economy tradition argues that the mass media powerfully shaped by their political, economic organisation which include ownership, cross-ownership, monopolies, competition, public service, broadcasting and content of advertising and that this political and economic structure influence media audience".

In remedying the dilemma as earlier cited and in a bid to understand the fluctuating phenomenon; communication scholar, Dennis McQuail, outlined key factors affecting the audience which includes: multiplication of channels, conglomeration which is increasing some audience sizes, fragmentation of the mass audience, segmentation according to market characteristics and escape of the audience from management and measurement (McQuail, 2010).

While further elucidating on factors reshaping the nature of the audience, McQuail argued that multiplication of channels' from the traditional linear model, i.e one-way traffic communication by Harold Lasswell, which is sender-message-receiver have not only given way to reverse transmission as it concerns the changing role of the sender to receiver and receiver to sender; but also the phase of the audience as an active user of what message is being communicated, how such message is decoded, in what context, to what effect, which in turn determines what and how the audience will encode as feedback. By this, we are beginning to experience what is described as 'audience dictating and shaping' the media.

Citing Sonia Livingstone under the title "Media Audience, Interpreter and Users comparing and contrasting," McQuail noted: "One difference between these models is that in the linear model the audience is placed at the end-point of the influence process."The deriving behaviour of the audience according to Iftikhar (2020) is no doubt a result of the nature and characteristics of new media platforms which allow for instant interactivity with media

content creators on the same platform, thereby making the then traditional all-time receiving 'audience' reactive encoding-decoding audience.

In similar regard, 'conglomeration increasing some audience sizes' as identified by McQuail, although barely expatiated by the scholar, could point toward the audience being bought, huddled and bundled by dominant cultural conglomerates and corporations—what the Frankfurt/critical School called "culture industries" to call attention to the industrialization and commercialization of culture under capitalist relations of production (Kellner, 2001). Audiences in McQuail's context are likely consumed in the contents they consistently consume from the media, thereby making them more susceptible to being victims of the ideological 'spiral of silence'.

The disintegration of the mass audience has over time made capturing the media audience a demanding task. It should be noted, however, that mass media audience disintegration was bound to happen.

Therefore, fragmentation of the mass audience as responsible for ending paradigm shift in audience research account for the multiplicity of divisions among the audience, thereby making the audience study a cumbersome task. Industrial revolution and technology have increased commercial production and the market for same while competing to attract the public to the cultural products and services. Hence, segmentation according to the market gives attention to slices of media targets in accordance with certain criteria. These criteria are carefully fashioned out of mass audience composition as a result of audience research constantly embarked upon.

According to Cantor (1994 p.168), as cited in (McQuail, 2010), "audience as market segments rather than audiences as cultural politicians remain the most important powerful influence." Segmentation in respect of market features emphasizes the strategic need to split and target the audience, who are considered buyers (consumers) of the product (contents) the media sells (publish) in their different markets places (media platform). The implication of this, according to the scholar, is that idea of segmentation is driven by market forces. Media space buyers such as advertisers, conglomerates, governments and corporations focus on balances between demand and supply of media that are essential to determine which segment of the general audiences is being targeted or appealed to. Therefore, the medium with the most demanded content attracts or pulls a larger share of the audience and the media space buyer in toe.

McQuail, while adding the escape of the audience from management and measurement asserted that it was becoming more difficult to keep track of the audience:

To manage or predict its composition and the direction of its interests, even if new technology such as that of the people meter and other forms of computer analysis of system users also improves the flow of information back to the media. The potential 'escape' of the audience from management and control, as well as the greatly increased choice, seem to be entries on the credit side in the balance of audience power (ibid).

From the foregoing and to understand the audience, along with changes in media, especially of the emerging types of media; media audience researchers have to put into consideration

the core changing aspects and underlying factors responsible for the swinging roles of the audience. The implication of this in McQuail's words is that we have a new audience emerge: "Interactive and consultative", which has encouraged negotiated interaction between the media and audience, thereby balancing the power of the two. Neuman & Pool (1986) in McQuail (2010) argued that escape of the audience leads to new types of audience invoking the idea of a balanced relationship, which is described as: "invoked the idea of an equilibrium model", where the reaction to information overload is done by reducing the 'quality' of their attention to the media.

### **Trends in Audience Behaviour in the Digital Era**

There are multiple observable trends thrown up by the advent of the Internet—from mass involvement on social media platforms to citizens becoming news purveyors to user-generated content. Primarily, Benkler (2006), suggests that the idea of mass involvement to have become more prominent when the Internet arrived and the potential it projects have given every netizen the role of a writer and information purveyor. And because the Internet has increased the role of the audience in agenda setting mode; the media in pursuit of the traditional agenda building role has very little choice but to turn to those contents the Internet have given access and citizens now creates. Benkler said: "Social media has changed the way people view and perceive things in today's world. Mass involvement within social media lets the general voices be heard. Comments and replies give the potential for people to address your thoughts or open new doors for conversation."

On account that mass involvement has come to stay, netizens have continued to leverage their mass strength to pursue certain objectives, such as rallying support for a particular cause or calling attention to certain injustices whose victim(s) are identified as unduly being oppressed by an individual, government or corporation. Before the Internet, causes such as these are manipulated and reined in by the aggressor who is often powerful, wealthy and properly connected with access to media apparatus, making certain that those raised voices are never heard. But that has now changed. From a single post on Twitter or Facebook tagging 'influential influencers', with thousands, perhaps millions of followers; such post could go viral in a matter of minutes— attracting not just local attention but a national and international response.

Therefore, as the audience voice assume easier access to the media and is harder to put down; people (leaders) whether in government or conglomerates no longer ignore the new phenomenon. They seek to engage, design, develop, create, secure and maintain legitimacy for their policies and initiatives. Hence, the audience engaged in mass involvement on cyberspace has become the new foot soldiers of the propagandist's machine, where thousands of willing netizens are sometimes recruited into creating multiple and multitude of online profiles, where they match, like 20th-century soldiers into battlegrounds on the Internet to prosecute their objectives—negative or otherwise.

In past communications history, this engagement was impossible as there was rarely a mass movement, but atomised engagements with letters filed to a newspaper or feedback to radio and television, which may never be acknowledged. Moreover, mass movements of the era were circumscribed by geographical access and often drive their actions via collated initiatives—in form of petitions. Digital space has changed the rules: a petition on Change.org

or a Tweet or even a Facebook post could garner signatures or reactions in hours; orchestrating a nationwide protest, campaign or even a revolution. It was instrumental in the Arab Spring Revolution of the 2000s which spanned Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, etc. The Ukrainian Orange Revolution: a series of political events and protests that took place from late November 2004 to January 2005 also benefited from the digital era mass involvements.

### **Citizen Journalism: The Voice of the Digital Age Audience**

The Internet has widened the scope of the effects that the digital age has on Journalism. The lack of a traditional gatekeeper in terms of editorial responsibilities online have given rise to an ongoing phenomenon—citizen journalism. The early advances that the digital age offered journalism were faster research, easier editing, conveniences, and a faster delivery time for articles (Waisbord, 2019). Today, it has made information dissemination hands down and quicker—far removed from the intricacies and bottlenecks which constitute the traditional model of mass media processes. This leeway has opened floodgates of multifarious publications on cyberspace that allows anyone to share anything or something they deemed important to put out for consumption. Social media platforms, websites and blogs have been made available to individuals without professional journalistic training to transmit user-generated content via their blogs or platforms—these are often referred to as citizen journalists. In several circumstances and occasions, citizen journalists can disseminate information that may not be reported by legacy media. Recent observation has shown that some mainstream media rely on the contents of citizens' journalism for their media offerings. The audience not trained in the art of journalism is asked to gather news in form of amateur videos, audio files and reports; these are filed using mostly smartphones to the media outlet for publication.

### **User-generated Content**

Similarly, user-generated content is an integral part of citizens journalism and is construed as any content designed and distributed online by users or 'untainted' journalists. It serves as an important source for media content, especially during crisis or in the case of hard-reach areas (Rauchfleisch et al, 2017 in Nenadic).

Recent development in the communication exchange indicates that the audience encouraged by the advantages presented by the social networking platforms are ungratified simply as mere consumers of information—therefore, making information available, assist her case with the traditional media is no longer sufficient for today's audience. The audience expects to be able to choose what they consume and believe they should contribute content and opinion. This shift in the social media revolution is what has birthed user-generated content. Because the audience behaviour's shift has established essential links to the newsgathering process, media organizations are left with limited choice but to provide facilities for amateurs to publish their content and in the process embellish media offering. User-generated content has also been characterized as citizen media as opposed to the "packaged goods media" of the recent past. Citizen Media is audience-generated feedback and news coverage (Pavlik&McIntosh, 2014; Battelle, 2006). Historically, mainstream media outlets incorporating user-generated content into their news coverage is considered to have started in 2005 with the BBC's setting up of a user-generated content team, in the wake of the July 7, 2005, London bombings (Norman, 2006).

A 2016 study by Michael Zeng and his colleagues on publisher business models found that the audience of online news platforms value articles turned in both by professional journalists, as well as users— "provided that those users are experts in a field relevant to the content that they create. In response to this, it is suggested that online news sites must consider themselves not only a source for articles and other types of journalism but also a platform for engagement and feedback from their communities" (Zeng, 2016).

### **The audience, Media Access and Status Conferral**

The chief factor in media pluralism is the possibility for an individual to seek, access, receive and share information effectively. Access to information can include: scientific, indigenous, and traditional knowledge; freedom of information, the building of open knowledge resources, including open Internet, open access and availability of data; preservation of digital heritage; respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, such as fostering access to local content inaccessible languages etc (UNESCO, 2015). Media access according to another UNESCO position also involves quality education for all, citizens, lifelong and e-learning; diffusion of new media and information literacy, skills, and social inclusion online. It also involves using the information to address inequalities based on skills, education, gender, age, race, ethnicity, and media accessibility by those with disabilities; and the development of connectivity and affordable ICTs, including mobile, the Internet, and broadband infrastructures (UNESCO, 2018).

In the same breath, Michael Buckland has identified six barriers to be surmounted if access to information was to be achieved. He listed the impediment to encompass: identification of the source, availability of the source, cognitive access, price of the user, cost to the provider, acceptability (Buckland, (1991).

Obviously, access to the media extends beyond the mere ownership of gadgets and devices which enables the consumption of media content. The audience should be availed the opportunity of being featured in or by the media—i.e, they should be able to contribute content. As it concerns broadcasting, with the assistance of telecommunication, the media have co-opted the audience into contributing to content through radio and television phone-in programmes. The audience-partnered programmes, either in sports, business, politics, current affairs, entertainment etc has given the public leeway to be co-content creators through their opinion, comments and contributions and has in the process, push to the limelight image and personalities of such regular contributors to the medium and programmes—the media status conferral.

Status conferral is the idea that mass media coverage isolates and confers prestige or importance on persons or groups covered in the reportage. The recognition extended by the press testifies that the honoured is important enough among the humongous and anonymous mass to have been singled out and 'showcased'. Broadcast media outlets have come to noticed and recognize such individuals when they call into radio or television programmes. Tv stations also deliberately sought out those among the mass who are experts in their fields to pick their brains on ongoing issues being featured on such outlets. It is observable, therefore, that a part of the audience makeup no longer stay in the background to consume content but have now been thrust before the microphone and camera as contributors to media content.

In the case of a newspaper web offering on a burning or trending issue; a single post could engender hundreds of thousands of comments and reactions, especially when such items are posted on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. Newspaper newsroom editorial policy seems to have adopted a pattern where reporters monitor comments bordering on trending issues then inculcate such audience's comments on subsequent newspapers report or updates to stories.

## **Conclusion**

Traditionally, audience research has placed the media audience at the receiving end of the message dissemination process, even though some scholars have argued against this configuration. However, digital technologies in the Internet age and the opportunities it projects has shifted the power dynamic in the newsgathering, production and dissemination while democratizing information power in the hands of every citizen. The aftermath is that the era removed the traditional gatekeepers role of the media and the restriction functions the authorities sometimes performs in the media and communication history. The mass media audience designation as traditionally understood is now undergoing fluctuation. The information age has given the audience voice that is now easier to access and harder to put down.

The audience, having been empowered by the New media to free itself from the earlier 'manipulative' influence of the conventional media have assumed the role of content creators. As consequence, it is suggested that scholars and researchers in the field of media and communication studies reappraise the audience configuration and continue the design and redesign of new models of communication to put the audience in the digital age in proper perspective.

On the flip side, it is recommended that more research and proposition could be done to separate and segment the audience's conformation. There could be an accentuation point where a dichotomisation between the audience of digital media and the traditional legacy media or an infusion and cross-liberalization of both could be achieved.

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