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The ‘Audience Concept’ in Mass Communication

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Abstract

This paper x-rayed the audience concept from a general communication and Mass Communication perspective. Thus, the paper relied and reviewed existing literature on four aspects of the concept: Definition; Categories/Classification; Theoretical Perspectives and The Future of the Audience. Consequently, the paper traces audience as a term to the sixth element in the communication process as identified by the Shannon and Weaver model of 1949. Specifically, the paper also points to the early origins of today’s ‘media audience’ as beginning from theatrical and musical performances as well as in the games and spectacles of ancient times in ancient Greek or Roman theatres or arenas. Thus, ‘audience’ from a general communication perspective, is described as the receiver of a disseminated information, while it is heterogeneous, scattered, anonymous dynamic group when considered from the Mass Communication angle. In addition, the audience can be classified according to type, content and use of media, respectively. Besides this, the paper also classified audience based on four stages of evolution, the elite stage, the mass stage, the specialized stage, and the interactive stage. The paper concluded that, tomorrow’s audience may greatly differ from current ones because the fast-changing information technology has made it possible for a very interactive and specialised audience.

Key words: Communication, Mass Communication, Communication Process, Audience

Introduction

The word ‘audience’ has long been familiar as the collective term for the receivers in the model of Mass Communication process (source, channel, message, receiver, feedback and noise). It is a term that is understood by media practitioners and theorists alike and has entered into everyday usage. However, there is still room for differences of meaning, misunderstandings and theoretical conflicts.

Folarin (1998) traces ‘audience’ as a term to the sixth element in the communication process as identified by the Shannon and Weaver model of 1949. Although at that particular period, destination was used in the place of audience and the model specifically placed emphasis on the central nervous system as where the message is processed for final use. Another, model - Lassell (1948) which came on board a little bit earlier, actually pointed out clearly that the receiver which today is referred to as the ‘audience’ is one of the crucial elements in the communication process. McQuail (1998), however, points to the early origins of today’s ‘media audience’ as beginning from theatrical and musical performances as well as in the games and spectacles of ancient times. Earliest notions of audience around this period were of a physical gathering in a certain place. Most often, a Greek or Roman

city would have a theatre or arena, and it was no doubt preceded by less formal gathering for religious or state occasions.

According to McQuail (2005), the Graeco-Roman audience had many features that are familiar today. These characteristics include planning and organization of viewing and listening, as well as of the performances theatre, events with a public and popular character secular (thus not religious) content of performance for entertainment, education and vicarious emotional experience voluntary, individual acts of choice and attention, specialization of roles of authors, performers and spectators experience.

Thus, from the assertion above, it can be rightly argued that audience as a set of spectators for public events of a secular kind was thus already institutionalized more than 2000 years ago. Available literature shows that this 'audience' type had its own customers, rules and expectations about time, place and content of performances, condition for admission, just to mention a few. It was typically a verbal phenomenon, often with a commercial basis, and content varied according to social class and status. Thus, due to its public character, audience behaviour was subject to surveillance and social control.

A scrutiny of the afore-mentioned attributes of the early audience will reveal that today's mass media audience definitely shares some of the characteristics. This is not to say that there are no differences as there has been a multiplication of audience type. This is particularly obvious because technological advances in the media industry have brought about social innovation, dominant mass audience that retains some of the attributes of the early audience, but, at the same time different in variety of ways.

However, the word 'mass audience', as we know it today was first used by Henry Blumer in the late thirties. Blumer defined mass audience formally as a new type of social formation in modern society, by contrasting it with other formations, especially the group, crowd and public. The term 'mass' captured several features of new audiences for cinema and radio that were not covered by any of the three concepts. The new audience was typically much larger than any group, crowd or public. It was very widely dispersed, and its members were usually unknown to each other or to whoever brought the 'audience' into existence. It lacked self-awareness and self-identity and was incapable of acting together in an organized way to secure objectives (McQuail, 2005).

Audience Conceptualized

Olufemi (2000, p. 113) defines the 'audience' as "a collection of individuals with shared experiences, traditions, conditions of life and need. This group of individual varies according to their social classes, economic interest, religious beliefs and concerns". This grouping falls under local, national and international audience with their separate interest, however, a common characteristic that cut across the audience groupings is that they are all active. This perhaps explains why for most communication scholars like Sambe (2008) contend that, 'communication' and indeed 'mass communication' ceases to exist once we remove the 'audience' element from the process.

For Sybil, Isaac and Oludayo (1999, p. 9), the audience can be looked at as receiver or decoder of a message. They explain further:

The decoder is the receiver of the message, the intended audience or the person or group who receives and responds to the message. The receiver/audience must receive the message and then decide whether or not he/she is ready to participate in

the communication exchange. Every message is meant for someone and if that person is not there, then the message gets stuck and the communication intention remains unfulfilled.

Amplifying the above assertion, Nightangle (2009) affirms that, the audience especially that of the 'mass media, are often defined as the destination, the receiver, in a sender – message - receiver system or sets up of mass communication as receiver the audience has been thought of as the masses the general public, marketing targets, commodities or individuals differing in significant characteristics, example, age, sex, ethnic, origin, and self esteem. However, Sambe (2008) opines that the 'audience' as a concept in mass communication does not connote specific individuals, but, a large heterogeneous scattered and anonymous group of people.

Hence, messages addressed to specific individuals are not customarily regarded as mass communication. Such a criterion excludes letters, telephone calls, telegrams and the like. This does not deny the fact that the postal and telecommunication systems play important roles in the communication network of any society. "Most certainly they do indeed, in some instances they are often linked to the mass media performing vital functions in the overall communication process and aiding for example, the spread of information to some areas of the society or segments of the population not reached by the mass media" (Sambe 2008, p. 30).

In summary, therefore, the definition of the concept or term 'audience' can be looked at from two perspectives: (i) the general communication perspective: which considers the 'audience' as one of the basic elements of the communication process (receiver). In fact, the destination of the 'message' or information in the communication process. (ii) The mass communication perspective: which considers the 'audience as a group with these features: heterogeneous; anonymous; scattered dynamic and active.

Classification

Audiences are both a product of social context and a response to a particular pattern of media provision. Often they are both at the same time, as when a medium sets out to appeal to the members of a particular social category or the residents of a certain place (McQuail 2005, p. 396). Thus, there are different ways of characterizing or classifying the 'audience'.

Nightingale (2003) in McQuail (2005, p.397) proposes these four distinct classifications of audience thus:

- (i) Audience as the people assembled: this refers essentially to aggregate member of people measured as paying attention to a given media presentation or products at a given time. They are often referred to as 'spectators'.
- (ii) Audience as the people addressed: this refers to a group of people imagined by the communicators and for whom content is shaped. This is also called 'inscribed' or 'interpolated' audience.
- (iii) Audience as happening: the experience of reception alone or with offer as interactive event in daily life contextualized by place and other features.
- (iv) Audience as hearing or audition: this refers to the participatory audience experience when audience embedded in a show or is enable to participate by remote means or to provide response at the same time.

However, for Okenwa (2000, p.29), the audience as a concept in mass communication can be classified based on “four stages in audience evolution, the elite stage, the mass stage, the specialized stage, and the interactive stage. In the ‘elite stage’, the audience is relatively small and represents the more educated and refined segments of society”. This type of audience does not consist of or represent the ‘average man’ or ‘average woman’ as the case may be; a local example can be seen in the audience of *The Guardian* newspaper, which is considered a small group, but a specialized audience.

In the ‘mass stage audience’ type, the potential audiences consist of almost the entire population with all the segments of society likely to be represented. This is why the media content in this case has to be designed to appeal to what has been called the least common denominator in the audience. Okenwa (2000) further explains that the audience in the specialized stage however, is typified by fragmented special interest audience groups. Thus, to get to this particular group, media content is carefully designed to appeal to distinct and particular audience segments. Lastly, in the ‘interactive audience’ stage, the individual audience member has some selective control over what he or she chooses to see or hear. In effect, the audience member joins in the process as an editor, in some cases, even as a transmitter of information. A classical example is today’s news bloggers phenomenon on the internet.

Fab and Agbo (2000) provides in more specific terms classification of the audience from the three primary mass media perspectives. The print audiences, the radio, sound recording audiences, and the film and television audiences. Firstly, the print media audience is mostly only literate in whatever language and in most cases, universal language like English and French. The radio audiences on the other hand are largely more generalized and all inclusive group of people. They are an easy to reach normally large people that may necessary not be as literate as the print media type audience. This is why a number of scholars have claimed in recent times that these groups have the greatest number in terms of size. For the film and television type, the audience may be classified under the ‘elite group’ as the receiving sets in most parts of developing nations are expensive and thus, considered elitist. Thus, in order for a person to be included into the television audience category, he or she must fulfill certain economic and personal pre-conditions (Fab & Agbo, 2000).

In summary, ‘audiences’ especially as concerning Mass Communication exists within contexts. The contexts within which they exist are defined by the relations which exists between audience and the other elements in the Mass Communication system (AJCS, 2009). This is perhaps why it is particularly difficult to get a straightjacket classification or categorization of the audience as it relates to Mass Communication. However, from the literature on this aspect, one thing comes out clearly; that is categorisation of ‘audience’, depends on ‘type of media’ as well as ‘needs of the audience’.

Theoretical perspective on ‘audience’

Early mass communication research was mainly preoccupied with media effects, especially on children and young people and with an emphasis on potential harm. ‘Nearly every serious effect study has also been on audience study, in which the audience is categorized as ‘exposed’ to influence or impact whether of a persuasive, learning or behavioural kind’ (McQuail, 2005, p. 403). The results of these studies are a number of theories that explain how audiences respond and use mass media messages. This paper will, however, highlight and briefly discuss some of the related theories.

Available literature suggests that first studies by scholars on how mass media messages affect audiences resulted in what is today called the Instinctive Stimulus Response Theory (S-R theory) otherwise called the 'Hypodermic Needle' theory. Folarin (1998) opines that the theory in effect holds or assume that all human beings responded inescapably and uniformly to the powerful stimuli from the media. Here, the theory saw individuals as isolated members of the mass audience and as such, there could be no social controls or ties to counter the powerful influence of the media. However, some years later, further studies revealed that it might not be possible for individuals to respond uniformly to the messages as they differ in personal psychological organizations and biological endowments.

These studies showed that attitude, values and belief are learnt in the context of experience and this resulted in differences in cognition and perception. This gave birth to what is today called the Individual Difference Theory (Folarin, 1998).

Other theories like the Social Categories and Social Relations quickly followed to give a deathblow to the Stimulus Response Theory. Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008) explain that, the Social Relations Categories Theory holds that mass media audience consists of different sub-groups. Thus, members of a particular social category have identical values, interests and attitudes which will be different from those of members of other social categories. As a result, a person's social category determines the media of Mass Communication he uses and how he uses them.

The Social Relations Theory on the other hand, assumed that members of the mass media audience belonging to the social category interact or relate with each other. Consequently, the interactive and relationships among members of the same social categories determine the effect of mass media messages on them (Anaeto et al., 2008).

Apart from the afore-mentioned theories that debunked the assertions of the 'magic bullet' or 'hypodermic needle' theory, the 'One Step Flow' theory also brought very interesting postulations that clearly put to rest the argument on whether or not mass media effects were indeed linear. Again, Anaeto et al. (2008) opine that, the 'One-Step Flow' theory contends that members of the mass media audience do not actually receive messages at the same time and that the mass media have effects on its audience at different rates. In addition, members of the audience act in response to the mass media messages at different times.

Other theories like the 'Two-Step Flow' theory, 'Multi-Step Flow' also followed and further amplified and strengthened the belief that it is not possible that mass media audiences to receive and respond to messages uniformly. Rather a number of intervening variables come into play and ultimately determine how and possibly, when the audiences respond to mass media messages. Furthermore, the 'Uses and Gratifications' theory which came later, also reinforced and to a certain extent, solidified the above assertions. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2008), the 'Uses and Gratification' theory explains that media and content choice amongst the audience is generally rational and directed towards certain specific goals and satisfactions. Thus, the audience is seen here as active and are conscious of media-related needs, which arises from personal and social circumstances.

Audience as a 'Commodity'

As stated earlier, at the onset, communication researchers believed and viewed audiences as isolated individuals in a mass society, vulnerable to direct effects. This perhaps was the root of the 'powerful medium' and 'passive audience' theories era. Livingstone (2004) explains that the dominant perception was that of a mass society, characterized by

loss of faith in human rationality with radio listeners as isolated individuals, alienated from communities to which they belong and prone to radical demagoguery.

However, subsequent studies showed that, audiences were not as isolated and amenable to influence as early researchers had imagined. Rather, audiences were active and not passive consumers of information. In addition, the studies revealed that audiences were selective and so many factors come into play in determining what to receive and how to react. As a result of these findings, a dramatic shift was made by researchers and the focus became how audiences use information disseminated to them. That is: the origin, nature and degree of motives for choice of media and media content (Williams, 1992).

Thus, having realized that the 'audience' is not as malleable as earlier thought, encoders of information like: advertisers, marketers, policy makers and other stake holders began to court and see 'audience' as a definite or tangible 'commodity'. From this point on, the audience assumed a 'commodity' status whereby the success or failure of any media organization today is determined by how well it has positioned itself to reach its audience, (Bittner, 1989). Okenwa (2000, p. 26) advances this argument:

The audience is today regarded as a commodity. It is the most important single factor in the mass media. Not only does the audience determine what goes in as stories in a newspaper or programmes in a broadcast outfit, at the end of the day it is the audience that would consume the media products. The audience is wooed by the advertiser who pays for the use of air-time as a means of reaching the largest audience. It is, in fact, the audience that guarantees the survival of the media of mass communication.

Similarly, Lometti (2009) opines that broadcasting stations and several networks now sell their audience as a 'commodity' to advertisers and other interested parties. Thus, from the mass media perspective, audience is now a 'commodity' to sell. The goal is to sell as many ads as possible while at the same time charging as much as advertisers are willing to pay. From the advertiser's perspective, the goal is to buy time into programmes whose audience contain as many people as possible with the demographic characteristics most desired by advertisers (Nwosu & Nkamnebe, 2006).

In summary, advertisers want to buy these audiences as efficiently as possible. In order to accomplish this; therefore, the media industry usually describes audiences and their reach in terms of costs per thousand.

The future of the 'audience'

The world today is witnessing an explosion in advances in information technology. Early traditional media like newspapers, magazines and the ones that followed later-radio and television have continued to evolve and converge into perhaps a single media - the internet. Consequently, the effects on the 'audience' is likely to be very pronounced. In the early days, when the traditional media held sway, scholars viewed the audience as relatively small and represented the more educated and refined segments of society. Thus, during this period the 'audience' did not represent the 'average man' or 'average woman'. Then came an era where the 'audience' became 'mass' in orientation and scholars saw them as consisting of entire population, with all segments of society likely to be represented. This

was when the audience had features like: anonymity, heterogeneity, scattered and dynamic (Sambe, 2008).

In contemporary society, however, this perception has been greatly modified. Dominick (1993) contends that today's audience is specialized in all aspects. That is, the audience is fragmented consisting of special interests' groups. Thus, media content is carefully designed to appeal to distinct and particular audience segments.

However, with continued advances in information technology and sophistication of audiences, there are new evidences that tomorrow's audience will take a new nomenclature. Liebes (2005) and Agbo and Ndaliman (2009) suggest that we are already witnessing what tomorrow will be like for the 'audience'. They will be highly interactive in nature and the individual 'audience' member will have some selective control over what he or she chooses to see or hear. In effect, the 'audience' member joins in the process as an editor, or in some cases even as a transmitter of information. Gausu (2009) cites the news bloggers and facebook phenomenon on the internet as classical examples of the new trend and evolution of the 'audience'.

Conclusion

The nature and structure of tomorrow's 'audience' will definitely be shaped by social, technological and economic factors. In addition, media audiences within a single country will witness different levels of evolution as factors or variables inducing the changes may not necessary be at par in all countries of the world. Besides this, it is important to state that there is need to pay particular attention on the audience formation process. This will assist all stake holders in the media industry to better understand the nature and dynamics of the audience.

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