

## The Imitation Game as a Method for Testing Producers and Their Audience, Real and Imagined: A Proof of Concept

PHILIPPE ROSS  
University of Ottawa, Canada

What do producers know about their audiences, how do they know it, and how does this knowledge inform their output? Recent research has tackled these questions as they relate to journalists and social media users, but few studies have put their knowledge to the test, never mind with the audience's help. This study does so by conceptualizing the producers' orientation to, and tacit knowledge of their audiences, and by introducing the Imitation Game methodology to media and communication studies. It reports on a study that tested whether *Radio-Canada* producers could pass as members of their audience to actual members acting as judges. In 12 imitation games comprising dialogue around 63 questions, producers convincingly mimicked audience members on knowledge, preference, and biographical questions, and nearly so on opinion questions. Their critical reflections and plausible accounts of reception practice generally confounded judges across question types, thus demonstrating the method's promise.

*Keywords: imagined audience, production studies, tacit knowledge, Imitation Game*

Imagination has long been known to play a role in how producers define their audiences, but this has tended to be more a banal observation or passing concern than a matter for investigation. Perhaps it is because research in media and journalism and, more recently, production studies, that has addressed the topic has done so through some version of the argument that mass communicators rely on such means by default, in the absence of the more reliable cues that only direct interaction with their recipients are thought to provide (Thompson, 1995). In any case, it is no coincidence that the "imagined audience" has enjoyed renewed attention in recent years as social media has not only enabled producers to collect unprecedented quantities of data on their audiences but also drawn users into the kind of strategic thinking that used to be the preserve of professionals, lest their posts fail to register with their intended audience or fall into the wrong hands. Far from being resolved, then, what Gitlin (1983) called the "problem of knowing" (p. 19) has only gained in prevalence and complexity: No longer limited to media organizations and their established methodologies, it concerns anyone who engages in communication with indeterminate recipients, and it can require making sense of massive quantities of information. As Coddington, Lewis, and Bélair-Gagnon (2021) argue, audiences can seem more "knowable" today, but the need to rely on mental models "does not go away" (p. 1030).

---

Philippe Ross: [pross@uottawa.ca](mailto:pross@uottawa.ca)

Date submitted: 2022-03-21

Copyright © 2023 (Philippe Ross). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

So, how do producers imagine their audiences, where does this knowledge come from, and how does it inform their output? Researchers have been particularly keen lately to tackle these questions as they relate to journalists and social media users, motivated by the failures and/or existential crises that arise when anticipated and actual audiences do not align. Their studies have a lot in common in terms of conceptualization but also methodology: Traditional quantitative and/or qualitative methods are used from either side of the producer-audience divide to question the convergence of imagined and actual audiences. Few studies have sought to test the producers' knowledge of the audience, never mind with the latter's help. This study does so through a theoretical framework and methodology that are employed here for the first time in communication studies. The relevance of this approach lies in the central importance of the imagined audience to communication with indeterminate recipients, the need for a broader conception of the relationships that shape it, and for a method to enable its empirical exploration.

The paper begins by reviewing literature on the imagined audience, and it goes on to deploy a theoretical framework that turns on the producers' orientation to, and tacit knowledge of their audience. It then introduces the Imitation Game—a close relative of the Turing test in artificial intelligence—and reports on a study that used the method to test how well producers at the Canadian public broadcaster's largest French-language regional branch could pass as members of their audience to actual members acting as judges. It concludes with a discussion of the insights generated by this new method, its limitations, and its promise for research at the intersection of production and reception, which extends well beyond the scope of this study.

### **The Imagined Audience**

Major figures in early communication studies addressed the influence on media professionals of "audience images," or the mental models derived from experience that guide them in the absence of an actual audience (Gans, 1957; Pool & Schulman, 1959; Schramm & Danielson, 1958; Zimmerman & Bauer, 1956). Their studies were contemporaneous with Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955; Katz, 1957) work on personal influence in the reception of mass communication and, although they received scant attention while the two-step flow model achieved canonical status, they can be seen to share with the latter the central idea that, in a context of uncertainty, individuals turn to trusted peers to help them make up their minds. Indeed, audience images mirror the staggered process whereby information flows from mass media to audiences: Producers may gain knowledge of the audience directly through market research and engineered interactions with target groups but they are also influenced indirectly through their social experiences (Ross, 2014).

Research on the imagined audience of social media users has addressed similar concerns and come to similar findings. A first set of such studies asked whether and how regular individuals thought about the indeterminate receivers with whom they communicate (e.g., Brake, 2009). In perhaps the most cited study on the topic, Marwick and boyd (2011) argued that the "potential diversity of readership on Twitter" amounts to "unknown audiences," thus making it impossible for Twitter users "to vary self-presentation based on audience" (p. 3). On the whole, these studies showed that social media users do not so much know their audiences as "take cues from the social media environment to imagine the community" (boyd, 2007, p. 131). A growing awareness of the unpredictable, and sometimes traumatic (cf. Ronson, 2016), ways in which our social networks expand and combine online is the backdrop for more recent studies on how the imagined audience impacts behaviors on social media, with many building on Marwick and boyd's (2011)

concept of "context collapse." For instance, Jung and Rader (2016) showed that the composition of one's imagined audience impacts privacy concerns on Facebook, while Kim, Lewis, and Watson (2018) found that it combines with different platform affordances to shape the comments news readers leave on websites and on Facebook. Litt and Hargittai (2016) argued that social media users cope with the indeterminacy of their audiences "by envisioning either very broad abstract imagined audiences or more targeted specific imagined audiences," the latter being "most often homogeneous and composed of people's friends and family" (p. 1). Similarly, Gil-Lopez and colleagues (2018) showed that users have a "one size fits all" (p. 139) mindset when it comes to posting content in line with how they imagine their audiences.

As for the imagined audience in journalism studies, recent research has drawn on some of the early studies described above as well as, most notably, Marwick and boyd (2011). Citing the pervasive view in the news industry that a better relationship with the audience is key to its survival, Ferrucci, Nelson, and Davis's (2020) textual analysis of journalism trade magazines revealed that journalists imagine their audiences as marginalized groups keen to contribute to news production, as knowing more about its needs than journalists do, and as disdaining journalists' elitist conceptions of their work. Going beyond general conceptions of the imagined audience, Matthews and Al Habsi (2018) found that understandings of the audience impact journalists' practices in concrete ways, including how stories are prioritized for an "ideal news agenda" (p. 755). Several studies show the limitations of audience data and stress journalists' reliance on imagination and experience to compensate. For instance, Nelson (2021) argued that because audience data tell journalists what audiences do but not why they do it, the former "must make educated guesses about what they want [which] reflect how journalists imagine the audience more than they do the actual audience" (p. 5).

Two further studies stress journalists' skepticism of audience analytics and focus on the social mechanisms behind educated guesses. Robinson (2019) distinguishes between journalists' "learning from data" and their "learning from people" (p. 43), the latter comprising interactions with individuals and groups both "inside the newsroom" (colleagues, peers, sources) and "outside the newsroom" (friends, family, vocal strangers; p. 25). Similarly, Coddington and colleagues' (2021) survey of 544 U.S. journalists revealed that market research is the least relied-upon source of audience images and that the most salient dimensions of audience image sources are direct interaction with audience members and interactions in their "social worlds," that is, with friends and family and with fellow journalists. The study also illustrates journalists' reflexivity and their proximity with the audience: "views of their audience through the lens of their own social worlds are strongly connected to a sense of homophily with that audience" (Coddington et al., 2021, p. 1039).

The foregoing shows that understandings of the audience impact content production in diverse settings and in important ways; that they are not derived only or even mainly from direct, engineered interactions; and that even the most advanced audience data, no matter how explicit, do not speak for themselves but rather are mediated by the practitioners' broader social experiences. So "how do people's imagined audiences compare to their actual audiences?" (Litt, 2012, p. 333)—and how best to capture this? The following proposes a conceptual framework and novel methodology to find out.

### **Tacit Knowledge, Socialization, and Role Playing**

The need to represent the audience and the varied means through which producers do so echo findings on television and film production that are best summarized by Dornfeld's (1998) characterization

of producers as “popular anthropologists” who approach their audiences as one would a distinct culture. Here, too, market research and direct engagement (Caldwell, 2008) are seen as tools that are supplemented by the producer’s indirect experience of the audience, which manifests as tacit understandings and intuition (Zafirau, 2009), common sense (Caldwell, 2008; Dornfeld, 1998; Gitlin, 1983), and reflexivity (Dornfeld, 1998; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Zafirau, 2009). These imagined audiences do not stem exclusively from professional training or experience—they derive from the producers’ everyday interactions, of their “learning from people” inside and outside production (cf. Robinson, 2019, p. 43) who become proxies for the audience and can impact decision making at various stages of the process.

The interactions and experience that inform imagined audiences do not just speak to the complexity of the producer-audience relationship; they enable individuals to acquire a competence that is necessary for the practice of production or mass communication. As Collins and Evans (2007, 2011) argue, tacit knowledge is key to expertise in any domain, and it is acquired through “socialization into the practices of an expert group” (Collins & Evans, 2007, p. 3). Although production ethnographies have focused on the immersion of individuals in producer communities (Deuze, 2007; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Mayer, 2011), the foregoing suggests that the audience, too, socializes individuals into the producer role (Ross, 2014). This view is consistent with the circularity of the producer-audience relationship and the notion of “prior feedback” (Gans, 1957, p. 315), or indirect audience influence on production. The central importance of imagined audiences to this role and its performance can be conceptualized by adapting Goffman (1959) and Meyrowitz (1985).

Goffman (1959) argued that, for his dramaturgical conception to apply to everyday situations, the three parties in a theatrical performance—emitter, receiver, audience—must be compressed into two, so that the participant acting as *receiver* at any given point in an interaction is also the audience. But his model does not provide for the situation of production and its explicit orientation to an absent audience (Thompson, 1995). As the foregoing discussion suggests, those groups for whom producers play a role, and whose scrutiny they feel, are a third party to the performance (Goffman, 1959; Kaplan, 2021)—but one that is (also) subsumed by the *emitter* at any given point in the interaction. Thus, the audience can be said to be integral to the performance of the producer role (Ross, 2014). To make Goffman’s model amenable to production as described in the previous sections, two of its features need amending: its inclusion of only copresent, direct interactions in bound physical settings, and the isolation between spatial settings it states as a condition to effective role performance.

Meyrowitz (1985) offers a solution to both problems in stressing “the interdependency of all performances and behavioural settings” (p. 50) in a mass-mediated society. He argues that social situations are defined not by physical location but by the types of behavior available to others and that inform the roles participants play in a given setting. They are “information-systems”: “a given pattern of access to social information, a given pattern of access to the behaviour of other people” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 37). That addresses the first problem, enabling a conception of production as a social situation characterized by patterns of access to the audience, whether direct or indirect. Under this treatment, the producer role turns on the ability to mobilize knowledge of groups “inside” or “outside” production. As for the second problem, Meyrowitz (1985) provides for “synthetic roles” that merge opposing functions, but he predicates their successful performance on the spatio-temporal “distance” between the two constituent situations. Could the producer-audience be an exception? Meyrowitz (1985) otherwise

allows for it when he argues that: “[a]n individual’s front region behaviour in one role is, after all, an indirect back region to other roles. In a sense, each front region performance depends on a multiplicity of front and back regions” (p. 50). Thus, the producer’s social experience can be seen as a back region to production. Further, as with all performances, success in the producer-audience role will be a function of one’s “convincingness” to others: Roles are defined by one’s knowledge and experience (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 53), while status and authority depend on those with whom one must compete (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 63) to assert oneself in a particular role.

In sum, the role-playing dynamic affords access not only to the audience images individuals hold and the experience they draw upon in playing the producer-audience but also to their convincingness in this role. At least it does conceptually. What is missing is a method for operationalizing this empirically. Although the above suggests that in institutional settings of production, individuals take turns acting as producer-audience and audience-judge in the actual audience’s absence, I propose a method that is more than just a nod to “the actual audience on the other side of the screen reacting and judging the performance” (Litt, 2012, p. 333). The method—the Imitation Game—enrols actual audience members in judging the producer’s performance of the synthetic role of producer-audience.

#### **Method: The Imitation Game**

The Imitation Game is the precursor of the test Alan Turing designed to assess the extent to which computers can display human intelligence (Collins, 1990). The Turing test involves three players interacting via a text-based interface: one human judge and two respondents—one human, the other a computer. The judge is tasked with asking questions to figure out which of the two is the computer, while the object for the computer is to confound the judge by mimicking a human in conversation. In the Imitation Game, all three participants are human, and they also interact via a textual interface. The judge, who is a member of the “target group,” asks questions to figure out which is a fellow member of the group and which is a pretender trying to pass as a member of the group. Just like in the Turing test, the method can reveal the features members deem particular to the group, as expressed by the judge’s questions and the nonpretender’s answers, as well as the pretender’s ability to respond as a member would and thus confound the judge. The extent to which nonmembers of the target culture can pretend to be members indicates the extent to which that group understands the other (Collins & Evans, 2011).

Collins and Evans (2011) pioneered the method’s use in the study of cultural integration across four European regions and of a range of social experiences around, for instance, gender and sexuality, religion, and color-blindness (Collins & Evans, 2014; Evans et al., 2021). In urging the judge to ask questions that only a fellow effective group member would know how to answer, the method inherently focusses on tacit knowledge—and not the propositional knowledge found in textbooks or on the Internet—that is presumed to come from immersion in the relevant group. According to Collins and Evans (2011), outsiders can display the tacit knowledge at the core of a given culture, social practice, or profession if they come to acquire the requisite language through “social mixing [with effective members] or a special need to become fluent” (p. 1). Their fluency is measured by how well the judge can identify who is whom over a series of questions and answers.

### **Recruitment**

Imitation games were carried out as part of a case study of *Radio-Canada Ottawa-Gatineau*, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's largest French-language regional branch. Participants were recruited from the full-time staff involved in the production of content, excluding news, across the branch's radio and television channels, as well as its website and social media. They first took part in qualitative interviews aimed at understanding their backgrounds and perceptions of their audiences. As far as the imitation games that are the focus of this study, the interviews served only to enable the recruitment of participants—first producers, then audience members. Five interviewees agreed to take part in the games, all from the branch's radio broadcasting department: the head of programming; an assistant producer of the weekday morning program; the culture commentator and alternate host of the same program; the host of the weekday afternoon "drivetime" program; and the traffic reporter for the morning and afternoon broadcasts. These professionals worked outside of Radio-Canada's news division, but all had training and/or extensive experience in media practice, including journalism.

The interviews revealed a skepticism of evidence-based images of the Radio-Canada Ottawa-Gatineau audience promoted by CBC corporate management, as well as the widespread use of intuitive notions of the audience among staff. Interviewees perceived their audiences as highly educated, aged 40 and over, and as loving culture. As two interviewees put it: their listeners "are the kind of people who attend the book fair."<sup>1</sup> This prompted the recruitment of Imitation Game participants at the *Salon du livre de l'Outaouais*, the National Capital Region's annual, French-language book fair, from which the station was to broadcast its Saturday morning radio program before a live audience. There, I collected the names of 20 individuals who identified as "regular listeners"<sup>2</sup> of Radio-Canada Ottawa-Gatineau's radio broadcasts, particularly its morning and afternoon programs. Of those, five agreed to participate in the imitation games when later contacted with instructions.

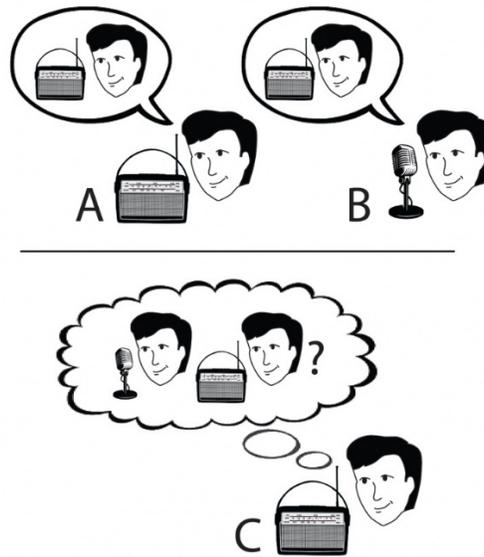
### **Procedure**

The target group explored through these games was the Radio-Canada Ottawa-Gatineau audience. As Figure 1 illustrates, the games featured audience members alternately playing the roles of judge (C) and nonpretender (A), and producers playing the role of pretender (B). They were framed as a test of the latter's ability to pass as regular listeners of Radio-Canada Ottawa-Gatineau.

---

<sup>1</sup> All data were translated from French by the author.

<sup>2</sup> The original French term, "fidèle auditeur/auditrice," translates literally as "loyal/faithful listener."



**Figure 1. Participant roles.**

A trial using the classic Imitation Game setup, where players interact in real time through the software designed at Cardiff University's Centre for the Study of Knowledge, Expertise and Science (KES), caused participant fatigue because of lag times between turns. Borrowing from Evans and Crocker's (2013) study on the experience and knowledge of chronic illness, an alternative was devised: asynchronous games using e-mail. The 10 participants (five new producers, five audience members) were combined to create 12 unique games, with audience members taking part in four or five games each in the role of judge or nonpretender, and producers playing the pretender in up to three games each (Table 1).

**Table 1. Participants.**

	<b>Judge</b>	<b>Nonpretender</b>	<b>Pretender</b>
<b>1</b>	Marie	Alain	Claudine
<b>2</b>		Sophie	Denis
<b>3</b>	Alain	Sophie	Aline
<b>4</b>		Marie	Martin
<b>5</b>	Mireille	Alain	Claudine
<b>6</b>		Germain	Marc
<b>7</b>		Marie	Martin
<b>8</b>	Sophie	Marie	Martin
<b>9</b>		Germain	Aline
<b>10</b>		Mireille	Claudine
<b>11</b>	Germain	Alain	Marc
<b>12</b>		Mireille	Aline

All participants received instructions on the game's purpose and roles. First, judges were asked to generate five or six questions that might allow them to distinguish between a fellow audience member and a pretender (or "impostor"). Instructions gave general advice on asking useful questions, for instance urging judges to avoid factual questions that could be answered by searching the Internet, or questions likely to prompt a "yes or no" answer. The questions from two participants, Mireille and Sophie, were taken from the aforementioned trial in which they took part and posed to new respondents (none of the five producers were involved in the trial). This resulted in five question-sets comprising five or six questions each, for a total of 26 unique questions (Table 2).

**Table 2. Unique Questions.**

Marie	Q1	When comparing the hosts of Montréal programs [lists popular hosts] with those from Ottawa [lists local hosts], what conclusion can a regular listener of Radio-Canada draw? Why has their arrival at Radio-Canada Ottawa left me cold?
	Q2	Each year, Radio-Canada hosts take part in the Salon du livre de l'Outaouais (SLO). In a discussion around the SLO, the weekday afternoon program host was asked what her favorite book was. After some reflection, she answered: "the book I was given in the maternity ward after having my baby. I read it from A to Z." I thought she was joking, and I was expecting a different answer, which never came. For whom are such words intended?
	Q3	How do you think producer recruitment works? Merit? Job postings and jury selection? Personal contacts? Seniority? Do evaluation criteria apply to a field other than journalism but in which they have experience combined with qualifications in communications?
	Q4	Why isn't there a literary or cultural program based in Ottawa? Why not be different? Don't you think that Anne Michaud would be more suited to that kind of program?
	Q5	Why always try, in [Saturday morning show] <i>Les Malins</i> and [weekday drivetime show] <i>Les voix du retour</i> , to imitate Rouge FM and the like?
Alain	Q6	In what way does Marie-Lou St-Onge contribute to the diffusion of French in her [weekday afternoon] program <i>Sur le vif</i> ?
	Q7	What expertise does Michel C. Auger bring to Radio-Canada (radio and television) from his days at La Presse?
	Q8	How does Rebecca Makonnen distinguish herself from the music programs on other networks with <i>Circuit Makonnen</i> , and how will she continue do so for years to come?
	Q9	Why has Anne Michaud, cultural commentator on [weekday morning show] <i>Les Matins d'ici</i> , stood the test of time?
	Q10	In the program <i>Plus on est de fous, plus on lit</i> , hosted by Marie-Louise Arsenault, what do the following mean: A) What should be consigned to the shredder? B) Who or what is in hot water? C) Whose tongue should be washed with soap?
Mireille	Q11	During the week, do you prefer the morning or the afternoon programs and why?
	Q12	Are the morning traffic reports useful to you as far as your daily habits?
	Q13	Describe the regional flavour of the Radio-Canada Ottawa Gatineau weekday morning programs.

- Q14 How do you find the quality of French used in the programs you listen to, and more specifically, *Les Malins*? Please explain by giving concrete examples.
- Q15 Do you use online platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) to express your views? Do you call the station when listeners are asked to comment or give their opinions on a given topic? Examples please.
- Q16 What is your relationship with the hosts? Are you attached to your programs and to the hosts? (Why?)
- Sophie Q17 Is there a difference to you between the Saturday morning program and the Sunday morning program?
- Q18 What interests you the most in the Saturday morning program?
- Q19 Do you find there is enough cultural content in the Saturday morning program?
- Q20 Do you like to participate in games/contests to win tickets to shows and events?
- Q21 What do you enjoy listening to aside from the Saturday morning program?
- Germain Q22 Does the music programming include too much anglophone music?
- Q23 Are there too many adverts?
- Q24 Should phone-ins focus more on sports?
- Q25 Does the morning editorial promote Québec nationalism or independence?
- Q26 Why don't Jasmine Lalonde's traffic reports focus more on the (Québec) Outaouais region?
- 

Next, identifying information was removed from the question-sets, and these were sent, along with instructions, to corresponding pretenders and nonpretenders with a request to reply to the researcher within a few days. Upon receiving the answers, the researcher assembled the material to constitute full dialogues in a Word form. Anonymized answers were combined with corresponding questions and labelled "Response 1" or "Response 2." Labels were assigned randomly to pretender and nonpretender answers from one game to the next but were constant within games to enable an overall judgment based on the cumulative dialogue. For each question, the form included a box for judges to tick to identify the pretenders; a four-point scale to register their confidence levels<sup>3</sup>; and a space to explain their reasoning. The same options were provided at the end of each game for the overall judgment. The forms were sent to corresponding judges, who were given a few days to complete and return them to the researcher (Figure 2).

---

<sup>3</sup> "1. I am unable to identify the impostor; 2. I am more unsure than sure; 3. I am more sure than unsure; 4. I am sure."

**Séance 1**

**Question 2.** Toutes les années, à titre d'animateurs, les artisans de Radio-Canada participent au Salon du livre de l'Outaouais (SLO). Avec une animatrice de l'émission de l'après-midi, on parlait du SLO, et on lui demandait quel avait été le livre qu'elle avait aimé le plus, sa réponse après réflexion : «Le livre qu'on m'a remis à la maternité de l'hôpital où j'ai accouché. Je l'ai lu de A à Z». Je croyais que c'était une blague et j'attendais une autre réponse qui n'est jamais venue. À qui pense-t-on s'adresser avec de tels propos?

Réponse 1	Réponse 2
Je suis au courant de la présence de Radio-Canada au SLO et je les ais croisés à plusieurs reprises, par-contre je n'ai pas entendu cette réponse, effectivement elle détonne un peu dans un salon du livre. Ceci dit je trouve rassurant que l'animatrice donne l'heure juste sans vouloir jouer un rôle.	Je pense que c'est une blague. Tout simplement. On a voulu montrer qu'il y a toutes sortes de lecture. Je pense aussi que Radio-Canada veut se rapprocher de la masse, montrer qu'il est accessible, pas trop élitiste.
<input type="checkbox"/> Ceci est l'imposteur	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ceci est l'imposteur

**Dans quelle mesure êtes-vous certain(e) de votre réponse (svp cocher une seule réponse) ?**

<input type="checkbox"/> Je suis incapable d'identifier l'imposteur	<input type="checkbox"/> Je suis plus incertain(e) que certain(e)	<input type="checkbox"/> Je suis plus certain(e) qu'incertain(e)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Je suis certain(e)
---	---	--	--

**Veillez justifier votre réponse dans la case ci-bas.** SVP vous référer autant que possible à des éléments spécifiques des réponses qui vous semblent révélateurs de l'imposteur et/ou de l'expert (auditeur fidèle).

Effectivement elle détonne un peu (cette réponse et j'ajouterais beaucoup, et que je ne crois pas que cela ait été une blague. J'ai sur mon mobile un enregistrement vidéo de cette partie de l'émission... et ce n'était pas une blague elle continue en nous disant de lui faire parvenir nos lectures préférées avec le plus grand sérieux.

**Figure 2. Sample dialogue.**

The study's scale precludes definitive conclusions, but its findings on the convincingness of those playing the role of producer-audience are nonetheless significant. More generally, the study—Collins and Evans (2017) might call it a “probe”—serves as a proof of concept of the Imitation Game for empirically tackling the intersection of production and reception.

**Results and Analysis**

Judges correctly identified the pretender in 6 of the 12 games. If we discount the one correct overall judgment registered with a “1” on the confidence scale, then pretenders fooled the judges and passed as audience members more often than not (five correct overall judgments; six incorrect; one “don't know”).

The following analyzes the pretenders' convincingness through their responses and the judges' guesses and reasonings. Analysis is structured around the type of questions asked, using Collins and colleagues' (2017) typology, which distinguishes between biographical, preference, opinion, knowledge, and situational questions<sup>4</sup> (pp. 520–521). The guess and confidence level recorded after each question

<sup>4</sup> “(1) Biographical: The respondent is asked to recount a story or detail from his or her own life or discuss how the individual handled a particular situation or experience.

enables a quantitative expression of the participants' abilities to convince the judges, while a ranking of questions by type suggests features more likely to be shared across the target group. In addition, a thematic analysis of the object of the judge's questions reveals specific aspects of their experiences as Radio-Canada listeners that are meaningful to them, and a thematic analysis of their reasoning provides substantive insight into the respondents' convincingness or how well they understand their audiences. Table 3 ranks question type by frequency for the 26 unique questions; Table 4 shows corresponding numbers for the 63 questions used over 12 games, along with the judges' success rate in identifying the pretender.

**Table 3. Question Type (Unique Questions).**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Opinion	9	35	Q2, Q9
Knowledge	9	35	Q10, Q25
Preference	6	23	Q1, Q11
Biographical	2	7	Q12, Q15
Situational	0	0	-
Total	26	100	-

**Table 4. Question Type (Total Questions) and Success Rate.**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>% correct judgments</b>
Opinion	21	33	52
Knowledge	19	30	47
Preference	17	27	24
Biographical	6	10	0
Situational	0	0	-
Total	63	100	-

### **Opinion**

Pretenders were the least convincing on opinion questions, which were the most frequent, but nevertheless fooled the judges almost half the time (11 correct judgments; 8 incorrect; 2 "don't know"). Examples of opinion questions include Marie asking respondents what they made of the afternoon presenter's claim that her favorite book was a guide to parenting (Q2), and Alain's question on culture

(2) Preference: Distinguished primarily by reference to likes and dislikes.

(3) Opinion: Questions that ask the respondents what they think about a particular issue, person, or situation.

(4) Knowledge: Either asks directly what the respondents know about a subject or requires respondents to understand specialized terms or jargon that are used without explanation in the question.

(5) Situational: Hypothetical questions, such as "If you had X, what would you do?" or "What advice would you give to someone if . . ." (Collins et al., 2017, pp. 520–521).

commentator Anne Michaud's longevity (Q9). Marie correctly identified the pretender on the former, with complete certainty, in both games 1 and 2. The following dialogue is from Game 1 (**bold** indicates judgment):

Q2: Each year, Radio-Canada hosts take part in the Salon du livre de l'Outaouais (SLO). In a discussion, the weekday afternoon program host was asked what her favorite book was. After some reflection, she answered: "the book I was given in the maternity ward after having my baby. I read it from A to Z." I thought she was joking and I was expecting a different answer, which never came. Whom are such words intended for?

Response 1 [Nonpretender]: I am aware that Radio-Canada was at the Salon du livre as I saw them several times, but I didn't hear this comment. I agree that it clashes with the Salon du livre. Having said that, I find it reassuring that the presenter would be honest and not try to play a role.

**Response 2** [Pretender]: I think she was joking. That's all. She wanted to show there are many kinds of books. I also think that Radio-Canada wants to get closer to the mass, show they are accessible and not too elitist.

Judge's reasoning: I agree the comment clashes strongly with the Salon du livre and I don't think she was joking. I have video of that part of the program on my phone . . . it wasn't a joke and she went on to very seriously ask listeners to send in their reading suggestions.

Both responses defend the presenter and the broad conception of culture implied by her comment but key for the judge was whether this implication was intentional. Marie felt that the answer that reflected her own critical opinion of the presenter's candour was from a fellow audience member, while the answer perceived as excusing the presenter by claiming she was joking, was the pretender's. The dialogue around the same question in Game 2 was similar—both respondents defending an alternative view to "culture with a capital 'C'" (Response 1 [Nonpretender]) and the pretender suggesting the presenter was joking—and it had the same outcome. This is consistent with the popular view of Radio-Canada listeners as elitist and demanding, and their mixed reactions to the young presenter in question when she replaced the 15-year veteran host of the program.

Named presenters were by far the most frequent object of the judge's questions, regardless of type (9 of 26 unique questions), and pretenders fooled the judges only three times out of 18 overall. This suggests that presenters are central to the Radio-Canada audience's experience and that perhaps something about the relationship eludes producers. But the results may also be because of how the study was presented to participants: Out of the 15 correct judgments on questions that focused on specific presenters, all but two were explained by what the judges perceived as an emotional (9) or diplomatic (4) defense of the presenter by a pretender they knew was their colleague. However, that is not to say that producers were complacent: Of the eight responses (regardless of question type or object) attributed to the nonpretender for being too

critical of presenters or contents, seven were, in fact, from pretenders—a further way in which producers convincingly mimicked their (notoriously fussy) audiences.

The judges knew that producers were playing the role of pretender, and this influenced their reasoning in additional ways and with mixed results. In the following dialogue around an opinion question from Game 8, Sophie incorrectly attributes Response 1 to the pretender:

Q19: Is there enough cultural content in the Saturday morning program?

**Response 1** [Nonpretender]: No, they should improve the formula and then I'll listen. Also, try to attract more young people. A big challenge, I think.

Response 2 [Pretender]: Yes, I think so. I don't listen to the whole show every Saturday as it's difficult with the family schedule. But I often hear interviews with artists and I quite like that. But sometimes I would like to know what is happening that day so I can plan an outing with the kids or in the evening.

Judge's reasoning: The term "improve the formula" is a technical term a professional would use. "Try to attract more young people" is odd for a listener; you would expect it from a producer concerned about ratings. Response 1 seems to have been written by a professional based on factors a listener wouldn't consider. In response 2, the reference to a family setting grounds the listening in everyday life, which Response 1 doesn't do. Response 2 reflects the needs of a listener: to know what's going on, be informed about activities. A response grounded in the realities of a listener.

This is one of nine instances of a judge attributing what they deemed specialist, technical jargon to the pretender—incorrectly so (as here) in all but one—while the response that depicts a context of reception was (incorrectly) attributed to the nonpretender. Producers were generally convincing when they evoked such a context: five of the six responses that did (to questions which, as here, were not biographical or situational) were deemed plausible and thus attributed to the nonpretender.

### ***Knowledge***

Knowledge questions were the second most frequent. Examples include Alain quizzing respondents on the meaning of idioms regularly used in an afternoon program (Q10) and asking for their appreciation of a popular presenter's background (Q7). The number of knowledge questions initially suggested that judges did not "get" the game's purpose: Since they were told the role of pretender was played by Radio-Canada producers, would they not expect the latter to know at least as much as audience members about contents and presenters? Yet these too were close, the pretenders managing to fool the judges just over half the time (nine correct judgments; nine incorrect; one "don't know"). This arguably is because the judge's own knowledge is not absolute or expressed unambiguously, as is obvious from some of the questions. Respondents must, in any case, work out their meaning, and they

can verbalize their interpretation, all of which urges them to respond as an audience member would and can provide hints as to their identity.

Judge Germain's approach provides an illustration. Germain asked "*Gotcha!*" questions meant to catch out respondents with little knowledge about Radio-Canada or its programming. For instance, he prompted respondents on the quantity of on-air advertisements (Q23) and whether "the morning editorial" promotes Québec nationalism (Q25). These were counted as knowledge, not opinion questions because there are no advertisements or morning editorial, and Germain's aim was to verify whether respondents knew this. That Canadian public radio does not contain commercial advertising may well have been known to a broad range of potential pretenders and not just Radio-Canada producers, but the judge looked for hints as to the respondents' identities in the manner of their answers; in both games, Germain was looking for an outright dismissal of the question. The four different respondents across two games expressed some perplexity; Germain identified more nuanced responses as belonging to the pretender. He was right once and wrong once on Q25, and wrong 70% of the time overall. Here is the exchange around Q25 from game 12:

Q25: Does the morning editorial promote Québec nationalism or independence?

Response 1 [Nonpretender]: I don't know what you mean but I don't think so. If defending francophone culture in Canada is seen as nationalistic or as promoting independence, there is a problem. That's Radio-Canada's remit after all! And presenters and commentators are entitled to their opinions.

**Response 2** [Pretender]: I don't think so. And actually I don't think there are many interviews with provincial politicians. I hear more interviews with local officials and federal politicians than with people from the Parti Québécois or the Québec Liberal Party. I've been in the region only 5 years and that question is rarely covered by Radio-Canada.

Judge's reasoning: The impostor is 2. Respondent 1 says, rightly, "I don't know what you mean" as there is no political editorial.

In contrast to the dialogue around Q2, discussed earlier, here, it is the nonpretender who makes the strongest defense of presenters, but the judge still attributed Response 2 to the pretender because of its failure to reject the question's premise, which to him indicated faulty knowledge.

### ***Preference***

Pretenders fooled the judges three times out of four on preference questions (four correct; eight incorrect; five don't know), the third most frequent type, thereby illustrating the popular notion of media professionals as experts in assessing public taste. Examples include Marie sharing her indifference to new presenters (Q1) and Mireille asking whether respondents prefer the weekday morning or afternoon programs (Q11). The latter produced the following exchange:

Q11: During the week, do you prefer the morning or the afternoon programs and why?

Response 1 [Pretender]: It is easier for me to listen to the morning show. I wake up to the alarm-clock radio and then, when I go downstairs to the kitchen, I turn on the radio to catch the rest of the show and stay informed. Especially about the weather, news, and traffic. I listen to the afternoon show but not as frequently. After a long day at work, I often prefer to read on the bus or to listen to music.

**Response 2** [Nonpretender]: I like both, especially when I'm in the car. There is a good mix of news, culture, and traffic. But I prefer the morning show as I quite like the host.

Judge's reasoning: The main hint I look for is thoughts that would be those of a media professional. Respondent 2 says "a good mix of news, culture and traffic." I don't think an ordinary listener would think about whether there is a "good mix" of news, culture, and traffic. I think an ordinary listener doesn't notice the nature of the information unless they need it, because listening is more passive than active (we zone in and out of different show portions, zone back in again later, etc.).

Here, the pretender's detailed depiction of practice convinced the judge, who incorrectly attributed Response 2 to the pretender based on their use of a so-called technical term and of a theory of the audience deemed too elaborate for ordinary listeners even while she, an ordinary listener, uses a similar term ("show portions") and theory in her reasoning. Beyond the pretender's convincingness, this suggests that the judge and the nonpretender share an ability to reflect on and express their experiences, despite the former underestimating their fellow listener—which may be a consequence of the game's premise, as discussed in the conclusions.

### ***Biographical and Situational***

Finally, few questions relate to what might be called practice. Only two asked respondents to recount a story or detail from their personal experiences (biographical—Q12 and Q15), while there were none on what a respondent would say or do in a given hypothetical situation (situational). There were some hypothetical questions, but they were to do with preference (e.g., Q1) or opinion (e.g., Q4). In any case, it is worth noting the pretenders' convincingness in responding to the biographical questions: Three different pretenders answered the two biographical questions, and they confounded the judge all six times (two incorrect judgments; four "don't knows"). This, combined with the pretenders' abilities to plausibly describe the practices of Radio-Canada listeners in response to questions that do not explicitly ask for such descriptions, suggests that producers understand the group's experience to a significant degree.

### **Discussion**

The producers' passing as audience members in a slight majority of games is consistent with what Collins and Evans (2014) call the "chance condition," where the pretenders' amount of interactions with the target group, and hence their abilities to answer questions convincingly, are presumed to be such that

judges must basically guess who is who.<sup>5</sup> No such hypothesis was posed in this study, but results are in line with the producers' supposed reliance on tacit knowledge and social experiences of the audience. Beyond this modest validation of the study's premise, analysis of the dialogue around individual questions yielded findings on producers and audience members that illustrate how useful the Imitation Game can be for exploring their intersection.

First, the games enabled producers to articulate how they imagine the Radio-Canada audience not in the abstract, but in relation to specific aspects such as the latter's (presumed) knowledge, preferences, opinions, and background; and in the context of a role-playing exercise analogous to a professional setting in that it engaged and tested the specialist knowledge they are presumed to hold. In this context, producers did more than just express how they imagined their audiences: they convincingly mimicked audience members on a majority of knowledge, preference, and biographical questions, and very nearly so on opinion questions. Their critical reflections on their work and that of their colleagues, the manner of their responses, and their descriptions of reception contexts generally rang true to the judges, confounding them across question types. In the context of these games, then, the successful performance of the synthetic role of producer-audience can be said to depend upon a shorter distance between imagined and actual audiences—that is, between the back region experiences producers mobilized in formulating their responses, and the experiences judges recognized as typical of the target group. This is consistent with the notion that producers deplore the "social distance" that separates them from their audiences (Zafirau, 2009) and that all their resources, from market research and social media analytics to first-hand experiences, aim to bring them closer together (cf. Ferrucci et al., 2020). Thus, situations that are explicitly oriented to indeterminate recipients may be an exception to the requirement of isolation between settings that Goffman (1959) and Meyrowitz (1985) both set out for effective role performance.

As for the kind of knowledge producers mobilized, it is possible that they drew on propositional knowledge (i.e., audience data) in crafting their answers, but that seems immaterial as the questions could not be deemed to have one objective, correct answer, and responding plausibly required more than getting factual content right, as even the dialogue around knowledge questions shows. By design, the games' dialogue turned on specific, sometimes subtle aspects of the Radio-Canada audience's experiences, such as appreciating a host's personality or sense of humor or weaving a program's contents into their everyday lives. And responses were deemed plausible when they somehow fit with the judges' own experiences and/or an understandings of what being a Radio-Canada listener entails for the group as a whole. About the extent to which the knowledge producers mobilized stems from their specialist/professional status or social experiences unrelated to production, it is useful to turn to Collins and Evans (2007), who distinguish between "ubiquitous tacit knowledge," which is acquired through the ordinary experience of everyday life, and "specialist tacit knowledge," which denotes a more exclusive level of competence because it requires immersion in a specialist domain (pp. 2–3). It is not possible to tell from these results whether producers possess the latter or whether mass communication rests on

---

The other possibility is that there is little or no interaction between the groups. In this case the hypothesis is that the person charged with pretending will lack the interactional expertise needed to produce plausible answers. As judges should be able to recognise these mistakes and correctly identify the participants, this is called an identify condition. (Evans & Crocker, 2013, p. 38)

ubiquitous tacit knowledge. But if being a “popular anthropologist” requires cultural knowledge, not technical ability, then perhaps the distinction is moot.

To enable that distinction, one would at least have to determine whether the audience of a given content or channel is a social group with particular shared opinions, knowledge, tastes, and practices. The limited number of participants in this study precludes such a determination; the lack of questions on practice, a crucial source of shared experience and tacit knowledge, suggests they are not. But the latter arguably reflects the status of Radio-Canada radio as a traditional medium with an older audience more than it does any notion that audiences generally are passive, defined by their tastes rather than their actions, or that they don’t convene and share experiences as a group. One can well imagine that imitation games around, for example, popular podcasts whose audiences are active on social media and interact on- and offline—including with producers—might reveal a strong practice component through the judges’ questions and thus enable access to the specificity of audiences and how (well) producers come to know them.

A different study might start with a more narrowly defined target audience—underrepresented groups, for example—and test producers on their understandings of them in the context of diversity/inclusivity initiatives such as those taken by CBC/Radio-Canada recently. Larger-scale studies might also better leverage the method’s quantitative component to enable comparisons across groups within a given organization or field of media practice, across organizations or fields, or across geographical locations and/or time.

So, there is a need for further reflection on the category of “audience” and on recruitment strategies too as, beyond the issue of sample size, this study relied on regular listeners self-identifying as such, which may have contributed to the group’s heterogeneity and some inconsistent results. A case in point: the judges’ knowledge that producers were playing the role of pretender impacted their reasoning, leading them to interpret as “too technical” phrases that, in different circumstances, might not have stood out; to dismiss actual producer statements for being too critical *for a producer*; and to treat with suspicion responses that questioned a judge’s premise or otherwise expressed a nuanced view. Results may well have been different if participants had been told only that pretenders were not regular Radio-Canada listeners, rather than producers specifically. However, withholding the pretenders’ function from judges would not be without its risks with respect to results consistency. Indeed, it is conceivable that some of the factors that judges evoked (e.g., the use of technical jargon) would apply equally to nominally generic pretenders as they did here to the producers, while other factors (e.g., detailed descriptions of program content) might simply be attributed to a very loyal listener. All this begs further reflection on the games’ setup and how a particular study’s purpose is presented to participants.

Finally, although this study argued that the Imitation Game is suited to exploring the producers’ knowledge of their audiences, alternative configurations can be envisaged for tackling different problems at the intersection of production and audience studies. For instance, one scenario might probe and compare different categories of producers, say television producers and YouTubers, to get at their particularities and commonalities. A different configuration altogether might reverse roles and test audience understandings of media practice, including journalism.

In sum, although more work is needed to realize the Imitation Game's promise for the study of producers and audiences real and imagined, this study stands as a proof of concept. The audience is a group that mass communicators—whether media producers, journalists, or social media users—have a special reason for knowing and that they, in many ways, claim to know. The Imitation Game is uniquely suited to investigating their claims, the largely tacit knowledge they are based on, and, indeed, the relationships that link production and reception.

### References

- boyd, D. (2007). Why youth (heart) social network sites. The role of networked publics in teenage social life. In D. Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth identity and digital media* (pp. 119–142). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Brake, D. (2009). "As if nobody's reading"?: *The imagined audience and socio-technical biases in personal blogging practice in the UK* (Doctoral dissertation). London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. Retrieved from <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4/>
- Caldwell, J. T. (2008). *Production culture: Industrial reflexivity and critical practice in film and television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Coddington, M., Lewis, S. C., & Bélair-Gagnon, V. (2021). The imagined audience for news: Where does a journalist's perception of the audience come from? *Journalism Studies*, 22(8), 1028–1046. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2021.1914709
- Collins, H. M. (1990). *Artificial experts: Social knowledge and intelligent machines*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.
- Collins, H. M., & Evans, R. (2007). *Rethinking expertise*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Collins, H. M., & Evans, R. (2011). *A new method for cross-cultural and cross-temporal comparison of societies*. Grant proposal submitted to European Research Council Advanced Grant program.
- Collins, H. M., & Evans, R. (2014). Quantifying the tacit: The Imitation Game and social fluency. *Sociology*, 48(1), 3–19. doi:10.1177/0038038512455735
- Collins, H. M., & Evans, R. (2017). Probes, surveys, and the ontology of the social. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 11(3), 328–341. doi:10.1177/1558689815619825
- Collins, H. M., Evans, R., Weinel, M., Lyttleton-Smith, J., Bartlett, A., & Hall, M. (2017). The Imitation Game and the nature of mixed methods. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 11(4), 510–527. doi:10.1177/1558689815619824

- Deuze, M. (2007). *Media work*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Dornfeld, B. (1998). *Producing public television, producing public culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Evans, R., Collins, H. M., Weinel, M., O'Mahoney, H., Lyttleton-Smith, J., & Wehrens, R. (2021). Evaluating the Imitation Game as a method for comparative research: A replication study using Imitation Games about religion. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 26(3), 249–262. doi:10.1080/13645579.2021.1986316
- Evans, R., & Crocker, H. (2013). The Imitation Game as a method for exploring knowledge(s) of chronic illness. *Methodological Innovations Online*, 8(1), 34–52. doi:10.4256/mio.2013.003
- Ferrucci, P., Nelson, J., & Davis, M. (2020). From “public journalism” to “engaged journalism”: Imagined audiences and denigrating discourse. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 1586–1604.
- Gans, H. J. (1957). The creator-audience relationship in the mass-media: An analysis of movie making. In B. Rosenberg & D. W. Manning (Eds.), *Mass culture: The popular arts in America* (pp. 315–324). Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Gil-Lopez, T., Shen, C., Benefield, G. A., Palomares, N. A., Kosinski, M., & Stillwell, D. (2018). One size fits all: Context collapse, self-presentation strategies and language styles on Facebook. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 23(3), 127–145. doi:10.1093/jcmc/zmy006
- Gitlin, T. (1983). *Inside prime time*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2011). *Creative labour. Media work in three cultural industries*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Jung, Y., & Rader, E. (2016). The imagined audience and privacy concerns on Facebook: Differences between producers and consumers. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2), 1–15. doi:10.1177/2056305116644615
- Kaplan, D. (2021). Public intimacy in social media: The mass audience as a third party. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(4), 595–612. doi:10.1177/0163443721991087
- Katz, E. (1957). The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on a hypothesis. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 21, 61–78. doi:10.1086/266687
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. New York, NY: Free Press.

- Kim, J., Lewis, S. C., & Watson, B. R. (2018). The imagined audience for and perceived quality of news comments: Exploring the perceptions of commenters on news sites and on Facebook. *Social Media + Society*, 4(1), 1–12. doi:10.1177/2056305118765741
- Litt, E. (2012). *Knock, knock*. Who's there? The imagined audience. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(3), 330–345. doi:10.1080/08838151.2012.705195
- Litt, E., & Hargittai, E. (2016). The imagined audience on social network sites. *Social Media + Society*, 2(1), 1–12. doi:10.1177/2056305116633482
- Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 114–133. doi:10.1177/1461444810365313
- Matthews, J., & Al Habsi, M. (2018). Addressing a region? The Arab imagined audience and newsworthiness in the production of Al Jazeera Arabic. *International Communication Gazette*, 80(8), 746–763. doi:10.1177/1748048518755210
- Mayer, V. (2011). *Below the line: producers and production studies in the new television economy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behaviour*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, J. L. (2021). *Imagined audiences: How journalists perceive and pursue the public*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Pool, I. D., & Schulman, I. (1959). Newsmen's fantasies, audiences, and newswriting. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 23(2), 145–158.
- Robinson, J. G. (2019, June 26). *The audience in the mind's eye: How journalists imagine their readers*. Tow Center for Digital Journalism Report. Retrieved from [https://www.cjr.org/tow\\_center\\_reports/how-journalists-imagine-their-readers.php](https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/how-journalists-imagine-their-readers.php)
- Ronson, J. (2016). *So you've been publicly shamed*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.
- Ross, P. (2014). Were producers and audiences ever separate? Conceptualizing production as social situation. *Television and New Media*, 15(2), 157–174. doi:10.1177/1527476412454686
- Schramm, W., & Danielson, W. (1958). Anticipated audiences as determinants of recall. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 56, 282–283. doi:10.1037/h0046100
- Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The media and modernity: A social theory of the media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Zafirau, S. (2009). Audience knowledge and the everyday lives of cultural producers in Hollywood. In V. Mayer, M. J. Banks, & J. T. Caldwell (Eds.), *Production studies: Cultural studies of media industries* (pp. 190–202). London, UK: Routledge.

Zimmerman, C., & Bauer, R. A. (1956). The effect of an audience upon what is remembered. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 20(1), 238–248. doi:10.1086/266612