'The Public is Dead, Long Live the Public': Audience Studies and the Complexity of Conceptualisation

Nico Carpentier, Caroline Pauwels & Olga Van Oost, (eds.), **The Ungraspable Audience/ Het on(be)Grijpbare Publiek,** VUB Press, 2004, 496 pp, € 30,50.

Reviewed by
Sofie Van Bauwel, Ph.D.
Ghent University

"The public is dead, long live the public" is a sentence out of the introduction of the reader *The Ungraspable Audience/ Het on(be)grijpbare publiek*(2004) which not only wonderfully describes the recent theories on audiences, but also covers the particular position of media studies in Belgium. This communication studies discipline is widely fragmented and described as dominated by traditional quantitative communication studies. Even more, most of the time, communication studies in this Belgian context are concentrated on the specific analysis of the Belgian media sphere. While interesting, these studies sometime lack a conceptualisation and a linking up with the international field. The book *The Ungraspable Audience* is one of the few examples which not only covers the field of media studies in Belgium and beyond, but also engages with the international realm of media studies. In that perspective, it was very courageous to publish a book which also includes English articles. This is particularly the case for a publication in the small Belgian market of academic books and in a sensitive sphere in regard to the language issue. Belgian publishers only publish books in either French or Dutch and are not so keen on publishing in other languages. This reader is a good example of the transgression of national landscape borders which depict the importance of the richness of the field of media studies.

The strange sentence the public is dead, long live the public' not only refers to the Belgian state as a monarchy and the continuity of this system, when the King had dead and the newly King gets on the throne. But it also grasps the plea for a renewing or rearticulation of audience analysis. It deals with the ambivalence in the audience conception and stresses the multi-layer, complex, and active conceptualisation of the public and the audience. The question on the existence of the audience, the form, and position goes beyond the one-dimensional concept of the audience. The editors use an interesting threefold perspective in which the status question is embedded. This perspective unfolds different paradigmatic positions and their differences in level of analysis and can be seen as an important intake to elaborate on the complexity of the audience concept. These three important elements of the audience concept are not only elaborated in the four theoretical articles but also in the contributions where specific media and formats are discussed. For example in the Dutch articles on consumers of the news on the North Belgian television and newspapers, on film audiences, and on users of ICTs, the complexity of audiences are emphasized. In the contributions on the specific formats of the reality show, Big Brother, and the format of 'pink journalism,' the three elements are also stressed in one way or another.

The Tentacles of a Multi-Dimensional Audience Concept

This first element and intake stresses the importance of the multi-dimensionality of the concept itself. The book not only provides us with a good example of analysis, it also engages us in this multi-dimensionality. In the introduction, the editors stress in a very elaborative way the different layers or dimensions in the definitions of audience as a concept. The plea for a conceptualisation where communities, genre audiences, organised or structured audiences, fans, and citizens are incorporated in the concept is a good example of the 'new' perspective in media studies. The one-dimensionality of either micro level or macro level is left behind and the multiplicity of audiences is taken into account. In the article *The identity of the television audience. Towards the articulation of the television audience as a discursive field* (2004, p. 95-122) Nico Carpentier generates an overview of the discursive field that surrounds the identity of the audience and elaborates on the multitude of dimensions using a deconstructive methodology. This article goes into the diversity of audience conceptions and focuses on the multi-dimensionality in an analysis of the theoretical conceptual field concerning audience studies.

The Active Audience

As a scholar, it is tempting to step into the active audience paradigm of the 1980s and celebrate with John Fiske (1989) and others the activity, agency, and the resistance of the audience. On the other hand, a strong belief in the passive relationship between audiences and media is still present in mainstream communication studies. These different and radical positions are engaged in a paradigm discussion for years now and the debate around this issue is polarised and to a certain point poisoned. In this volume one of the main pillars of the dialogue on audiences is this specific concept of activity. This is a concept that is rearticulated in a more culturalistic way (see Meers & Van Bauwel, 2004, p. 77-92) which contributes to the understanding of the complexity of active audiences. In the contributions of Joke Bauwens and Caroline Pauwels (2004, p. 67-94) on the borders of consumers sovereignty and especially in the article of Sonia Livingstone the concept of the active audiences is elaborated. In her article '*Television and the active audience*' (2004, p. 49-66) Livingstone elaborates on the endeavours of reception studies to conceptualise the active audience. She further stresses the need to use and engage with reception studies and to elaborate on the interpretive resources. This nuanced view is also stressed in the introduction where the editors articulating a conception of active audience which goes beyond the active/passive dichotomy.

Embedding the Situatedness, or Reconfiguring the Context

A third central element in the book and the conceptualisation of the audience is the context (no such word as contextuality) of this concept. Using different approaches the authors stress the importance of the embedding of media and media use in a social context and contribute to the contestation of the centrality of media. This is seen as a plea for a complexity of approaches reacting against the dominant articulation of audience as a mass of anonymous and passive media consumers. This volume offers three complementary definitions of audience and their situatedness which also structures the third part of the book.

The first approach stresses the audience as citizen with the possibility of conceptualising the audience as a political community. This approach elaborated by Peter Dahlgren (2004, p. 259-295) in his contribution on the dynamics of citizenship as a formal status and social agency. This citizenship not only allows us to elaborate the position of audience on the level of consumers of ideological media discourses but also as transnational and organised citizenship, like in the contribution of Leo Van Audenhove and Bart Cammaerts. The locality of citizenship is not forgotten, and in an article of Cammaerts we read a micro analysis of societal participation through Internet in libraries.

Secondly, the volume offers the rather newly approach of audience as cyborg. This concept which comes from feminist theory was conceptualised by Donna Harraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991). This conceptualisation offers academia a way out of the dichotomy of man/machine and rearticulates the subject/object relation. The contributions in this volume on the materiality of the body in an ethnographic analysis of dance audiences and on the materiality of media use of the web generation uses this cyborg approach. It also point out that this approach is maybe a little too engaged with new technologies but can be very useful when looking at traditional mainstream media.

The third and last conceptualisation of the audience is the one of the cultural passant. In the introduction this approach offers three sub-definitions, which in their own way, capture the complex relation between people and their cultural surrounding and social context. The sub- definitions of cultural participant, passant and omnivore are used and described in contributions on taste patrons and music, media use as part of cultural activity, and on children as consumers of culture.

To conclude: Into a dialogue

These articulations and rearticulations have according to Carpentier, Pauwels & Van Oost (2004) not the ambition to be exclusive nor is there an intention to offer the reader a complete audience typology. Nevertheless, the editors claim to deconstruct the hegemony of the audience as consumers and to offer a complementary conceptualisation. And they do so.

The book represents a dialogue between traditions and paradigms in a constructive manner and feeds the ongoing international discussion on audience studies within media studies and/or communication studies. The broad scope of this volume gives a good overview of recent theories, conceptualisations, and analysis in audience studies. At the same time it rearticulates the diversity of theoretical encounters of audiences and it also contributes to a new conceptualisation of the public as multi-dimensional, active, and situated. A quite comprehensive set of conceptualisations, theories, and analysis surrounding audiences has been brought into sharper focus through this book. This book undoubtedly contributes to consolidate and theorise audiences within media and communication studies.

References

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