



Audiences Across Media A Comparative Agenda for Future Research on Media Audiences

Introduction

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Contemporary media constitute an increasingly global, digital environment of communication, but audiences remain geographically and culturally situated. Research documenting and comparing audience practices around the world has been limited beyond commercial and cultural statistics not only because of the sheer cost of the necessary empirical infrastructure but also due to methodological difficulties of how to study the same medium in the context of different social structures and cultural practices. This special section presents empirical findings and methodological implications from a nine-country comparative study of media use in Europe and outlines potentials and perspectives for further comparative and cross-continental research.

Keywords: audiences, comparative research, cross-media communication, Europe, metamedia, users

Global Media, Local Audiences

While contemporary media constitute an increasingly global, digital environment of communication, audiences remain geographically and culturally situated. At the same time, research documenting and comparing audience practices around the world has been limited beyond basic commercial and cultural statistics not only because of the sheer cost of the necessary empirical infrastructure but also due to methodological difficulties of how to study the same medium in the context of different social structures and cultural practices. A seminal volume published more than 20 years ago, *Comparatively Speaking* (Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992), called for the field as such to become more comparative. Since then, sweeping developments of globalization and digitalization have stimulated

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more comparative work, across space as well as time, as recently summed up in Esser and Hanitzsch's (2012) *Handbook of Comparative Communication Research*. This special section of the *International Journal of Communication* presents empirical findings and methodological implications from a nine-country comparative study of media use in Europe and outlines potentials and perspectives for further comparative and cross-continental audience research.

The Cultural Context

Europe—the European Union and the rest of the region—represents a living laboratory of communication and culture. Growing out of a European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action involving more than 300 scholars from 33 countries (<http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu>), the nine-country study examined changing patterns of media use in Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Poland, and Portugal. Often thought of as one cultural unit, Europe, in fact, comprises a variety of political and economic systems and a similarly differentiated set of media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Media users, in their turn, are local cultural agents who participate in, and contribute to, the ongoing structuration of their societies (Giddens, 1984). Media afford essential discursive resources of social action.

European media, like media in other regions of the world, are being reshaped in an open-ended process of digitalization. The story is a familiar one of established media institutions—press, cinema, radio, television—being challenged by a growing variety of digital and online media forms; traditional business models as well as common of understandings of information and communication are subject to challenge. These developments have generated high hopes and deep worries, in research as in public debate. On the one hand, digital media have been said to facilitate a more participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006); on the other hand, the Internet might be seen to dissolve or dilute culture as commonly understood (Keen, 2007). Researchers remain hard at work trying to document and understand the scale and scope of ongoing changes in the balance between “old” and “new” media.

The COST Action project approached the contemporary media environment as a cultural forum (Jensen & Helles, 2011; Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983), in which classic human and social concerns and issues are being articulated and negotiated under new technological and institutional circumstances. Traditional forms of one-to-one and one-to-many communication have been complemented by many-to-many communication, as typified by social network sites. All three of these prototypes of communication are now available and accessible on digital platforms that amount to metamedia (Kay & Goldberg, 1999), integrating a range of old and new media. A central aim of the project was to examine new digital and social media and old mass media as part of a complex and changing configuration of technologies, institutions, and users. Compared to Lasswell's (1948) classic paradigm of who says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effects, the study asked: Who communicates with whom, across what media, in which flows and networks?

The Empirical Analyses

The central aim of the project was to produce an empirical baseline and to assess the validity of a

research design derived from an earlier national study (Jensen & Helles, 2011) as a basis for further comparative research. The comparative design employed national online panels whose members responded to standardized questions regarding access to, use of, and time spent on different media and technological platforms. Other questions addressed different kinds of Internet usage and the functions that respondents would use on their mobile phone (cell phone). Further questions included the private and public locations in which different media and genres are used as part of everyday life.

The individual articles of the special section present empirical findings from different analytical angles. (Appendix 1 provides a characterization of the sample and notes some of its limitations.)

- The opening article on “The Media Landscapes of European Audiences” gives an overview of media use patterns across the nine countries, and offers a typology of European media users at a cross-national level. The findings depict media use as a mundane, if complex, practice in everyday contexts of action, where media—new and old—are combined and supplemented, rather than being used one medium at a time or as a specific preference.
- “The Internet as a Cultural Forum: A European Perspective” examines the validity of the chosen research design (Jensen & Helles, 2011) for purposes of comparative research. The findings support the applicability of this model. Among other things, one-to-many (mass) communication, especially synchronous radio and television, remains the most time-consuming communicative practice. Further and more detailed results are in line with documented trends in recent audience research.
- The next article—“Digital Mediascapes, Institutional Frameworks, and Audience Practices Across Europe”—places media use in its institutional contexts, describing how different media systems help to explain different audience practices. A cluster analysis served to identify four distinctive media systems in Europe. The article, further, indicates how macro-level institutional structures influence micro-level audience preferences for particular media.
- The first of two articles on old media—“Is Print Really Dying? The State of Print Media Use in Europe”—examines the state of print media in the European media environment. Confronting a common perception among media practitioners and scholars alike, the findings indicate that newspapers, magazines, and books remain important constituents of both media supply and audience demand. More than half of the cross-national sample still read newspapers; almost half also read printed books.
- The next article—“Between Old Broadcast Media and New Networked Media: Materiality and Media Consumption Practices”—addresses the state of traditional broadcast media with special reference to the relationship between the material platforms and the use patterns for television and radio. Again, the results point to the continued predominance

of traditional radio and television sets in terms of time spent on these media, compared to access via digital and mobile platforms.

- “Spaces Across Europe: Where People Use Media” elaborates on the contexts of media use in light of the increasing accessibility of media throughout everyday life. Although media use has certainly diffused into a variety of public spaces, less so into professional settings such as workplaces and schools, the findings indicate that the domestic setting is still the most media-saturated space. The article also notes several sociodemographic and cross-national differences in this regard and points to five patterns of media use across social spaces.
- The final article—“Changing Patterns of Media Use Across Cultures: A Challenge for Longitudinal Research”—reflects on the lessons of this European project and outlines potentials and challenges for further research in and with other regions of the world. Because some countries are pioneers of Internet diffusion while others lag behind, comparisons within and between countries begin to suggest structural indicators, both at the country level and at the individual level, for further longitudinal research. In conclusion, the article considers approaches to organizing and funding sustainable cross-cultural research programs.

The Social Implications

Modern media—from the printing press to broadcasting and the Internet—have extended human communication radically across space, time, and social collectives, thus informing both local and global forms of culture. Communication research, in its turn, has been shaped, in part, by the specific conditions and circumstances of national academic and intellectual cultures (Park & Pooley, 2008). Whereas, traditionally, North American approaches, as critiqued and complemented by European traditions, have been dominant around the world, the last decade has witnessed renewed attempts at *internationalizing* (Thussu, 2009), or *dewesternizing* (Wang, 2011), media and communication research. At least one book title has suggested that also one of the latest subspecialties of communication research—digital media research or *Internet studies* (Goggin & McLelland, 2009)—needs to be internationalized.

Comparative studies present a special opportunity to revisit some of the conceptual as well as cultural assumptions that guide both media use and media studies. The present special section embraces that opportunity and calls for more comparative research in the future. As a public service, the field of media and communication research can be expected to feed its findings back into the societies and cultures being studied. Both scholars and other citizens may gain new insights by observing themselves, their societies, and their cultures in a comparative perspective.

Appendix 1: Methodology and Sample

Data collection was conducted as an online survey (computer-assisted web interviewing, or CAWI), using the Ipsos commercial respondent panels in five of the nine countries (in Belgium, Croatia, Hungary, and Israel, identical procedures of data collection were undertaken using other panels). This process was completed during February 2013, with two exceptions: In Italy and Portugal, data collection was conducted during April 2013 because the planned survey dates coincided with key national events that received wide media coverage and which could thus be expected to skew media use patterns during that period.

The nine country samples were designed to be representative of the age distribution of the segment of the population that had access to the Internet in each country, for people aged 14 to 75.¹ In addition, the national samples were balanced according to gender and across geographical regions in order to represent responses from both rural and urban areas. Because national statistics about the demographic composition of the online population vary considerably across the nine countries, both in terms of availability and quality and in terms of the demographic categories used, the study did not have a further basis of balancing across all national samples.

Sociocultural differences, inevitably, influenced the wording of questions, specifically regarding education and income, for which established national categories vary substantially. For income, respondents were informed of the median national income, and were next asked if their personal income level was (substantially) above or below this number. Since income levels differ markedly across the nine countries in the study, devising a meaningful set of intervals that would cover all countries was deemed unfeasible. A related but different problem had to do with educational levels: National educational systems in Europe differ substantially with regard to the classification of types and levels of schooling. Again, rather than attempting to devise a unified typology, respondents were asked about the number of years of education they had completed beyond mandatory elementary school. Upon completion of data collection, the educational data were recoded into an approximated International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) classification (UNESCO, 2011).

Beyond recoding of the material, the national survey data were combined into a unified data set. During this process, the individual variables of all data sets were tested for consistency of structure, and variable names were homogenized in English to facilitate comparative and collaborative analyses. The final data set consists of 10,742 cases, with 1,200 to 1,216 cases from each of the nine countries, with the exception of the Belgian data set, which contains 1,100 cases.

¹ In some countries, additional age groups were included to allow for supplementary analyses.

Appendix 2:
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