On Perspectives of Audience Studies

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Abstract

Technology, as a base, drives the expansion of communication in time and space, forming a new media environment, in which the environment-dominant changes happen to the audience. The study perspective is converted from powerful media to people, enlarging communication to a bilateral initiative studies. Under the impacts of media convergence, the audience is inclined to an initiative communication. Centering on individuals, it expands individual communications in the network environment.

Keywords: Media convergence, Audience, Initiative, Individual

Media runs everywhere (Roger Dickinson, Ramaswami Harindranath & Olga Linne Roger Dickinson, 2006), forming the primary way for bilateral information communication. A diversity of media carriers appear under the influences of new communication technologies. The audience can take advantages over the media in more flexible and various ways, and integrate new and old media into daily lives (Virginia Nightingale & Karen Hoss, 2006). Influential media communication is usually regarded as the core of attentions, and the audience is merely to take information passively. The open context has realized revolutionary liberations due to advanced communication technologies. The audience has turning into "searchers, consultants, viewers, reflectors, dialogists, and chatters" from "passive receivers, consumers, accepters, or target objects" (Denis McQuail, 2006).

In history evolution, researchers begin to pay attention to "people" and the subjective effects of audience, instead of the focus on former lateral disseminators. That is an expansion in initiative space generated by new communication technologies to the audience, and also a bilateral perspective in studying communication, instead of just researching the lateral meanings of communication.

Audience is the one who receives information passively in certain special scope. As the receiver in communication, the audience may be individuals, groups, or "mass".

A communication expert, McQuail, said in his work that: the "mass" concept was firstly advanced by Bloomer, a sociologist of Chicago school of sociology, in order to differentiate it from former "group" or "public". The mass is incapable of discrimination or rejection. Only if receive information from media, the mass takes them completely just as a target being shot down (Denis McQuail, 1997).

Generally speaking, the audience would accept all information from influential media. The powerful influences of media even impact the form of people's values. In 1938, a broadcasting play edited from Wells' fantastic story *Star Wars*, produced by Columbia Broadcasting System, caused a common panic for "Martian Invasion". This event effectively illustrates the theory.

The foundation of superstructure is determined by economic factors of social development. Along with progresses of science and technology, abundant media can enrich people's life. As urbanization keeps in advancing, people demands for more modern life and richer information gradually. The audience concept is close to the mass step by step. Mass communication becomes the mainstream of society. However, the mass communication at that time was criticized for lacking of personalities and spirits. It was an entertainment time.

Audience is regarded as "lifeless individuals" who receive information passively. Audience can get information by many ways, not only the mainstream media. To get media information is an expansion of mutual communication between people in social environment. Simply ways, such as oral communication, and interpersonal communication, are the foundation of media information. A survey of America president election organized by Lzarsfeld, a well-known communication expert, shows that: the mass communication media has little impacts on the public vote. No more than 5% of voters are influenced by media. The media could not exert its powerful influences. It proves that the audience is

not a target hit by influential media. From the perspective of taking the audience as colorful human being, they are the communication objects with subjective judgment and initiative.

As disseminators transfer information to the public, the information in nature contains certain thoughts and value systems. The supporter of certain thoughts and value systems expresses abstract ideas in form of stories or other visualized things. In narrating stories, the thoughts and value systems will penetrate into the minds of the public. As the public receives the information, they accept a set of thoughts and value systems as well. It seems to be a willing process. But in nature the influential media has the initiatives in the process, using exterior information to convey thoughts and value systems. Even after several accumulations, it may form groups or even culture circles. In *Reading Television*, take the wandering poets in traditional Ket society for example, and advance that media has seven functions in modern society. Thereof, it puts forward that media conveys the culture and consciousness of clan members by many ways. Every member in a culture circle, under the impacts of implicit power, accepts or even supports the influential value system, forming a consensus to practical environment. However, these implicit and penetrative contents are hard to be noticed in general. Just as what was said by Neil Postman, "why the media is unique is that although it directs us to know and understand things, its interference is usually unnoticeable".

Many theories concerns the impacts suffered by the audience from influential media, including the audience as targets, agenda setting theory, culture normalization theory, and significance constitution theory. Researchers focus on influential media communication and define the audience as being passive and flatten.

The study perspective is fixed on the powerful effects of media. Television is a classical representative of influential media in mass communication. A special communication form in mass culture comes into being.

The public is accustomed to television. The word custom usually comes along with television in a sense. Activities derived from customs have absolute influences on the public. Television's multiple attributes make the audience accept a kind of psychological closeness and penetration naturally. "Family watching mode" constitutes the communication way in group environment. "Accompanied watching" facilitates the acceptance of custom-dominant information.

Under the dominating effect, television contributes to the formation of mainstream values. But other media threats the sound foundation constructed by television. "A probability is that no matter what the new media is, it will locate aside the old media. But the old does not disappear. New communication technology will drive old communication technology to bear new role (Werner J. Severin & James W. Tankard, Jr., 2006)."

Television is to close and shape the initiative of mass communication media in the nearest way. The audience can not reject the psychological familiarity generated by closeness. By arousing an emersion of real life by charming images, television guides the audience enter the most familiar life. The communication effect class mode constructed by Ravich and Steiner rightly explains the classes of television communication. It includes cognition, feeling, and desire. Cognition refers to knowledge, information, and facts in thinking field. Cognition is a necessary approach for entering the feeling aspect, such as like or favorite. Feeling is the attitude and sense to things. Television offers rich information in cognition field, creating widely-accepted feelings by externalizing information, and realizing the maximum effect of information communication. Desire is a kind of trust and purchase in a psychological sense for news stimulus or guiding appetite in motive field.

To consume media products has become a custom in modern people's mind. In the *Consumer Society*, Baudrillard advances that people are surrounded by numerous things, what causes forcing purchases for unnecessary goods. Surrounding by various media products, people do not satisfied with pure life needs but desire for spiritual and psychological consensus. In the rich and visualized social cognition, people learn to select information by interests but not receive information passively. People are more like "initiatively takers". This law restrains changes of the way, by which disseminators penetrating into the mainstream values.

Fiske thinks: "the contents conveyed by the disseminator are organized according to specific cultural background and have nothing to do with the disseminator or his or her works. What the disseminator does is nothing but a communication media". Due to changes of modern media and diversity of communication means, it is necessary to understand the media development based on social existence. In the trend of commercialization, media products are also originated from market. To satisfy the public needs becomes a must in production. What it transfers must be in accord with the cultural needs of audience. The audience pursues freedom in selection instead of receiving anything passively, which causes a strong demand for initiative selection.

The political economics is to take the audience as commodity. In Smythe's opinion, as the audience spends time in watching advertising, they serve these commercial ads and become targeted commodity. The audience does not satisfy with the passive position as commodity. Limited communication ways can not help the audience express their feedback completely. The audience rating survey can not reflect individual or group inclination.

At the information times, the various, abundant or even inundant information impacts the sense of audience. The audience is surrounded by information. To possess information is not a need any more but become a custom. The

audience will be studied not as a group but as different individuals. In front of rich and colorful information, the audience will not feel at lost but hold the right of free selection. The audience will be inclined to pleasure information, what especially happens in an entertainment society but should not be defined as the selection of all audience.

Lymond Bauer in his *The Obstinate Audience* published in 1964 said that: "Information is not gun and bullets. It does not shoot at the audience but stays in a place where the audience deals with it as they like. The audience can reject disseminations, or explain information by other ways, or make best use of it as they like. The audience is obstinate."

As we emphasize on information disseminators, the audience is taken as passive receivers. Under the effects of multiple communication ways, the audience can make choice freely and even become the subjects of communication. The enrichment of communication ways gives the audience more chances to express individual or group desire. New technologies facilitate communication's revolutionary progresses. The participation of network also changes the formal balance between media producers and consumers from different aspect (Steve Bailey, 2005).

The initiative of audience is displayed completely. In the network, the audience can not only obtain information based on self needs but also express their opinions freely, which enhances the interactivity. The prosperity of BBS in network can also facilitate the interactivity. In the network, the audience can issue information as well, what makes them become disseminators. It profoundly overthrows the relationship between disseminators and receivers.

The network communication reflects information exchange and feedback, and the characteristics of bilateral communication. Not only the effects of network but also the coming of new science and technology revolution, and the emergence of mobile phones, televisions, and other communication ways have driven the changes of communication form and defined a new concept of audience. The appearance of new audience concept drives researches on the paradigm of audience. In *Audience*, Abercrombie and Longhurst cite Kuhn's paradigm concept, classify studies on audience into three paradigms, and advance the spectacle/performance paradigm that consists of spectacle, performance, imagination, and image, forming a new study perspective under the convergence of new media. As media image impacts the daily life, the convergence of media makes everyone directly or indirectly become an audience, as well as a performer. By this way, the contents producer in communication and the receiver integrate together. As the audience employs the media initiatively, the media will help the audience realize the search or construction of self image.

Studies on bilateral communication show that the audience can give feedback to disseminator's information instead of suffering passively from impacts of influential media. Considering individual personality, the audience is the subject with subjective inclination in selection. Special cultural environment, personal growth background, and unique belief cause the individual inclination to information in selection. The audience is individual or group in social relationships and cultural environment.

Perspectives of studying audience tend to follow certain rule in continuous evolvement, from taking the audience as passive receivers to paying attention to the initiative expression of audience as subjective individual, from focusing on individuals to impacts of placing the audience in certain social and cultural environment. But we have to admit that the audience is impacted by influential media indeed. The influential media constructs a cultural system under the mainstream influences, and form fixed value judgment standards. Meanwhile, audience's selection can also affect the media communication and even become the main force that influences the media.

People's subjective and objective integration is the base for bilateral communication studies. Just as what was concluded in McQuail's *Audience Analysis*: "Reviewing the history of audience studies, we notice that the studies are continuously developing from being controlled audience to self-governance. The evolvement of audience theories vividly shows us the changing route from the media disseminator perspective to the receiver perspective. The audience study tends to emphasize on the "re-discovery" of people (Denis McQuail, 2006).

From the ethnography perspective in media studies, no matter what it is ideology machine or communication media, it is not based on communication technologies or disseminators but originated from a group's daily life. There is a continuously creating relationship between "creators" and "creations".

Under the impacts of media convergence, the audience gradually forms the subjectivity. Due to the continuous changes of the relationship between the audience, and media text, individuals construct self media centers. The audience is not the passive receiver controlled by media texts but the initiative expresser for multiple media contents. In today's media convergence, the audience constitutes the personalized media center and becomes the performer who shows himself or herself by texts, which breaks the border between producers and passive receivers, forming a multi-dimensional space for information exchange.

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