Article

# An Agenda in the Interest of Audiences: Facing the Challenges of Intrusive Media Technologies

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## Abstract

This article formulates a five-point agenda for audience research, drawing on implications arising out of a systematic foresight analysis exercise on the field of audience research, conducted between 2014 and 2017, by the research network Consortium on Emerging Directions in Audience Research (CEDAR). We formulate this agenda in the context of the rapid datafication of society, amid emerging technologies, including the Internet of Things, and following a transformative decade, which overlapped with the pervasion of social media, proliferation of connected gadgets, and growing interest in and concern about big data. The agenda we formulate includes substantial and intellectual priorities concerning intrusive technologies, critical data literacies, labour, co-option, and resistance, and argues for the need for research on these matters, in the interest of audiences.

This article formulates a five-point agenda for audience research, drawing upon implications arising out of a foresight analysis exercise, conducted between 2014 and 2017, by the research network Consortium on Emerging Directions in Audience Research (CEDAR). The five priorities in our agenda are developed following a collaborative and systematic analysis of emerging trends in the field of audience studies over the past ten years—a "transformative decade" (Das 2017), which overlapped with the

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proliferation of social media platforms and what van Dijck (2014) calls an "ecosystem of connective media." CEDAR applied foresight methodologies, including trend analysis, stakeholder consultations, and horizon scanning exercises,[1] to turn from this transformative decade toward understandings of an unfolding future (Das and Ytre-Arne 2017a). Based on implications from this work, this article formulates an agenda with substantial and intellectual priorities for the field of audience research, also reflecting on systemic and research-political matters. We formulate this agenda in the context of the rapid datafication of society amid the arrival of emerging technologies, and consider possibilities within audience research for understanding the societal significance of these developments.

The theoretical, methodological, empirical, and epistemological challenges of understanding audiences, and speaking for their best interests in a changing media environment, have been the topic of lively debate at many critical junctions over the past decades (Barker 2006; Livingstone 2015; Morley 2006). With a long history dating back seventy-five years (Das and Ytre-Arne 2017b), the field of audience research has seen key theoretical understandings and empirical works originate in the era of television, and through studies of popular culture, in technological and societal contexts very different from today. In 2004, Sonia Livingstone formulated the simple but important question in the title of a paper "What Is the Audience Researcher to Do in the Age of the Internet?" and responded that not only could new media require some significant new thinking but also that the core interest of audience research in analyzing people's interpretative activities would be fundamental to understanding transforming media environments (Livingstone 2004). Since then, the field has seen social media appear, first as a new and interesting phenomenon, then as prevalent and permeating research questions and debates (Brabham 2015; Ellison and boyd 2013). As it stands in 2017, emergent technologies such as the Internet of Things (Ashton 1999; Evans 2011; Greengard 2015) could potentially entail even closer integration of connective technologies into everyday lives, and further blurring of boundaries of mediated experiences. Simultaneously, algorithmic media and datafication (boyd and Crawford 2012; van Dijck 2014; Veltri 2017) further challenge understandings of technological, economic, cultural, and political power relations in society. We argue that audience researchers can and should contribute to understanding these phenomena.

Further reasons for formulating an agenda at this point can be found in implications arising out of the foresight analysis conducted by CEDAR. First, it is crucial to note the hyperconnected nature of new, interactive formats, and how these have characteristics that can be deemed intrusive (Mollen and Dhaenens 2018). This is argued by our colleagues Anne Mollen and Frederik Dhaenens, who suggest that metrification and algorithmic functions of new interfaces preconfigure users into their design, but some of this is difficult to trace and cannot easily be detected by audiences themselves. This is inviting new forms of self-management as well as technology-management in terms of audiences' coping strategies. Second, as David Mathieu and colleagues note from their consultations with stakeholders, audiences are increasingly presented with a difficult and dichotomous range of choices by these preconfigurations, and a more meaningful range of choices need to develop, in which audiences do not have to choose

between engagement with media or technologies, or protection from pressures and intrusions (Mathieu et al. 2018). Third, intrusive technologies should call further attention to the unevenness of power arising out of new media-audience relations. Small acts of engagement such as liking, clicking, or sharing, rather than laborious and dedicated practices alone, are functioning as productive acts of interpretation into mainstream media flows (Kleut et al. 2018). And fourth, these acts of creativity with newer formats and forms of content enter economic relations more than ever before, generating new forms of hidden labor, vulnerabilities, and disparities (Vesnic-Alujevic et al. 2018a).

From such implications, we produce a short, indicative list of priorities for audience analysis, as it stands today (Das and Ytre-Arne 2017a). Across the priorities, we argue for contextualized, critical research into everyday encounters with intrusive and algorithmic interfaces, overcoming a range of limitations of large-scale, big data approaches (c.f. boyd and Crawford 2012), reasserting normative ambitions behind holding media institutions accountable for fairer outcomes for audiences in datafied societies, and carrying into this task the close to seventy-five years of research into audiences' experiences as readers, listeners, viewers, fans, subcultures, users and publics, and other, overlapping categories. Also, we are conscious of the European contexts of knowledge production at work in CEDAR. Thus, the purpose of this agenda is not to produce an exhaustive list of topics the field of audience research should be concerned with but rather to highlight priorities emerging from the technological and political intersections that have been crucial to the foresight project we have completed, and that are suited to the context of emergent technologies described earlier.

## Analysis of Audience Experiences and Newer Literacies in the Face of Intrusive Technologies

Our first priority is the *analysis of individualized and hyperconnected audience experiences—and of newer critical literacies emerging—in the context of intrusive technologies and the developing Internet of Things*. A broad spectrum of research questions now emerges around the notion of hyperconnected technologies. As argued by our colleagues from CEDAR, technologies can be deemed "intrusive" through characteristics that reflect on how power over audiences is inscribed, such as pervasiveness, formativity, exploitation, and exclusion (Mollen and Dhaenens 2018). Referring to critical inquiries into the seeming neutrality of platforms (Gillespie 2010), these changes entail further attention to the design of platforms and interfaces, and to what Gillespie (2014) calls the "anticipated user" embedded within these. But as audience analysts, we suggest moving beyond structural analysis itself to investigating emerging coping strategies, algorithmic literacies (Sundin 2017), and critical data literacies being developed by audiences to face intrusive technologies (Mollen and Dhaenens 2018).

Our formulation of this priority, therefore, is not intended merely to point at this topic—although that is an argument to be made in its own right—but also to offer an interpretation of it, and some potential routes forward. We highlight the potential

contributions of audience research by drawing on the idea of audience experiences, referring to classical concerns in audience research. The concept *experiences*, central to traditions such as phenomenological theory (Cerbone 2006; Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002) and applied in audience research (Wilson 2009) and cultural studies (Gray 2003), grounds our interest in understanding the interwoven and multidimensional social life worlds in which audiences engage with media and technologies. As we refer to audience experiences, we propose to carry with us some collective, cultural, and power-related dimensions that go beyond the notion of users. Likewise, our use of "literacies" (c.f. Livingstone 2008), here emphasizing newer and critical literacies, signals the potential and significance of culturally and socially shared and developed knowledge to face technological challenges.

While concepts such as experiences or literacies are well-known to audience researchers, the formulation of our priority emphasizes the hyperconnected, intrusive, and often even deceptive features of newer technologies in and beyond what we understand as media. There is a potential for conceptual tension between the characterization of an individualized hyperconnected media environment and the notion of audience experiences, or between intrusive media and newer literacies as a potential response. It is precisely in this field of tension that theoretical and empirical work is needed. Of particular worth here, we suggest, is the role of *critical data literacies* and *algorithmic literacies*, which bring together now advanced conceptualizing of media and digital literacies. This finds particular importance in the context of growing concerns around truth and trust in contemporary societies (see the newly formed LSE commission on the topic), and sits within a necessary impetus to research audiences' engagements and encounters with dataism and datafication in their lived everyday lives (Kennedy 2017).

## Analysis of Political Dimensions of Resistance to New Media and Emergent Technologies

While our first priority emphasizes the transforming technological contexts audiences face, our second foregrounds the *political aspects of audiences' reactions and responses to intrusive technologies, particularly emphasizing resistance to new media and emergent technologies.* This priority is an outcome of scenarios developed by CEDAR for audiences in 2030 (Vesnic-Alujevic et al. 2018b). Combining different possibilities for understanding developments along two axes—uptake of technological developments and political participation in the context of changing institution-state-audience relationships—CEDAR's scenarios called attention to the political significance of the degree, pace, and form of audiences' responses to technological transformations (Das and Ytre-Arne 2017a). Therefore, a substantial effort is needed to research different expressions of resistance to media and technology, including lower or slower uptake of connected technologies, evasion, abstention or non-use, ambivalences, resignation, strategic or selective self-management of technologies, skepticism, critical voices, and protests.

One dimension of this priority relates to discussions arising on surveillance and risk in datafied societies. van Dijck's (2014) conceptualizations of "dataism" as a widespread secular belief, which "is so successful because masses of people—naively or unwittingly—trust their personal information to corporate platforms" (van Dijck 2014, 197), is critical here, not least because it might seem to many as though the *people* might be to blame, rather than the interfaces and their *intrusions* themselves (see also the six provocations about big data presented by boyd and Crawford 2012). Thus, we suggest here that audience researchers spend time making sense of the everydayness of dataism, its ordinariness, and the casual "media-faith" so to speak, which is invited by intrusive technologies, combined with critical and systematic analyses of the surveillance mechanisms and risks that audiences face, asking how privacy and safety concerns can be guarded as algorithmic media and the Internet of Things develop further (Mollen and Dhaenens 2018). Here, it is evident that work, not only in science and technology but also in media law and policy, could fruitfully be adjoined with research on audiences' responses to these developments. This also means paying attention to the conditions of production where intrusions arise and where these meet audiences' coping practices (Mayer 2016).

A second dimension of this priority concerns the potential political dimensions embedded in audiences' everyday navigation of their media environments. With the longstanding attention to active audiences, whether through interpretation as in reception studies through to debates on produsage (Bruns and Schmidt 2011), and whether we are all producers now (Bird 2011), people's relationships to media have often been framed through their manifest positive engagements. The idea of studying those who opt out is not in itself new, but overall, it seems natural that studies of television viewers would outnumber studies of those who refrain from watching television. Yet with notions of datafication permeating society, and with intrusive technologies and merging of media into a new range of everyday life artifacts with the Internet of Things, comes a more complex view on this matter. As we already see increasing interest in analysis of historical and cultural media resistance (Syvertsen 2017), nonuse or evasion of genres or technologies (Helsper and Reisdorf 2013; Portwood-Stacer 2012; Shetata et al. 2015; Van den Bulck 2006), or diverging processes of domestication of media (Sandvik et al. 2016), we argue that these and related phenomena need further theorization and broader empirical efforts, particularly concerning their transforming contexts and conditions with the Internet of Things.

Third, as we emphasize political dimensions as one aspect of this priority, we underline its key connections to more widely used understandings of participation and the political in audience research and adjoining fields. We note, especially in the context of datafication, the need for fuller convergence of audience analysis and research on citizenship and participation. Such research would most fruitfully bridge attention to formal political systems, including elections and governing institutions, or small- and large-scale socio-political movements locally and globally, with analyses of political dimensions of audiences' everyday experiences. One such connection is the citizen-consumer conceptual pairing, which has been used fruitfully by scholars (Das and Graefer 2017; Lunt and Livingstone 2012) to make sense of relationships between

institutions and individuals in the public sphere but that calls for critical reflection again in the context of the Internet of Things (Turow 2017).

Analysis of resistance could fruitfully draw on resources brought forward in the past decade of audience research, as the uses of social media and digital technologies for different forms of participation were theorized and empirically researched as a key dimension of the conversation on transforming audiences (Carpentier et al. 2014). Normative purposes of institution-individual relationships have further been foregrounded in Schrøder's (2012) history of conceptualizations of citizenship in audience research, evolving toward the ubiquitous, or Livingstone's (2013) account of the participation paradigm bringing with it the normative agenda of figuring out if there "is enough participation in society, should institutions be more participatory, are young people too apathetic, who's listening to citizens' voices, whose voices are going unheard, and what should be done about it?" (Livingstone 2013, 5). This also means recognizing the value of many related fields in media and communications, while also broadening the scope to other disciplines such as sociology and political science, for understanding citizens' diverse and interwoven relations with media and politics. We propose that audience analysts need to more fully develop relationships with studies of digital citizenship in datafied societies, including the challenges posed to this by the fundamental alterations in the balance of power between the state, private institutions, individuals, and publics (Hintz et al. 2017).

## Researching Both Fundamental and Emerging Experiences with Newer Technologies

Our third priority follows our interest in how audiences engage with newer media and technologies but argues for careful consideration of the lenses through which such practices are studied, and to which dimensions of engagement that are highlighted through scholarly interest. This means for us *a renewed commitment to researching widespread and fundamental audience experiences such as reading, viewing, listening, and interpreting, also with regard to social, digital, and newer media, developing a more careful balance between interest in production and other audience practices*. This is necessary to address a potential imbalance we see developing, as the affordances of newer media draw increased attention toward audiences' productive acts, while, interesting as these might be, other activities remain central and indeed more widespread in audience engagements not just with the so-called old but also with new and newer media.

Assessing gaps in the field of audience research over the past decade, CEDAR has argued for the study of the nature and outcomes of audiences' attentive work, from the political dimensions of listening (Murru 2016) to self-management-based coping strategies on intrusive interfaces. Furthermore, CEDAR has drawn attention to "small acts," as Kleut et al. (2018) have argued that small acts of engagement need to be conceptualized in terms of their level of productivity, ranging from casual acts, such as endorsing, liking, clicking, and voting, toward more intentional and motivated acts such as sharing, commenting, debating, and producing small stories, dividing these

acts further in terms of the scale of effort involved and a conceptualization of their un/intended effects on more mainstream flows of content. This term in itself addresses part of the imbalances described earlier, but further empirical research and conceptual development is needed.

This priority has theoretical, methodological, and empirical dimensions that are yet to be fully taken up in research on widely studied phenomena such as social media. Data from different social media services might range from comparatively easily accessed to closely protected blackboxes (Bucher 2016), and while it is fruitful to develop methodologies for analyzing these data, these methodologies would nevertheless tend to prioritize productive acts such as posting, sharing, or liking. However, as media use also involves more widespread practices such as reading, and viewing and listening, analysis of digital traces appears to give limited insight into the processes of interpretation and meaning-making involved. Some studies draw on methods and concepts from reception research in investigation of these dimensions of social media use (e.g., Mathieu and Pavlickova 2017), but more research is called for. Theorists have emphasized the need for understanding social dimensions in the age of big data (boyd and Crawford 2012; Couldry 2013; Livingstone 2017). Responding to this call, we find that the strengths of audience research in qualitative methodologies, attention to context and everyday life, to cultural communities, and to processes of interpretation, appear as valuable resources. Moving into a future where further intrusive technologies emerge and where the Internet of Things could reach a point of ubiquity, we propose that what we have here deemed fundamental audience practices will remain central areas for research, particularly important to capture everyday engagements with these technologies.

## Critical Investigation of the Co-option of Audiences' Attention, Data, and Productive Labor

Our fourth priority is the critical investigation of *co-option of and commercial interests in audiences' attention, data, and productive work*, incorporating transnational flows of media content and reframing longstanding interests in citizen-consumer dichotomies in the face of technological transformations. Another direct outcome of CEDAR's foresight analysis, this priority emerged from interest in industry appropriations of audience labor and attention, and the performance of the more immaterial and affective dimensions of labor in a datafied world. Referring to the balance we argued for in the previous priority, we underline here that it is not merely audiences' productive acts but also their attention and data, as well as immaterial dimensions of audiences' engagements, which are objects of commercial and political interest.

In terms of the co-option of audiences' material labor and productive acts, Vesnic-Alujevic and colleagues (2018a) suggest that digital media platform design is shaping content and audience agency into computable data, through a process of metrification, translating agency into metrics, enabling companies to exploit the participation of audiences as free labor. Examples of automation underlying datafied society are algorithms, which they argue are used for filtering information on social media platforms

and search engines, on the one hand, and for social and political bots, on the other hand. They go on to argue that this co-option is sometimes even unsubtle, and visible, through the creation of ranked user-communities, for instance, as commercial bodies often address audiences to take part in the development of their media products as "volunteer workers." Audiences' creative work is then seemingly rewarded, they suggest, through rankings and peer-review within Facebook communities. The co-option of audiences' attention, as given in the use of algorithmic media and technologies, can often follow similar logics, rendering the point on the possible subtlety of co-option as particularly crucial. We now see increasing interest in phenomena that center on the premise of receding transparency when audiences' attention is sought and co-opted for potentially covert purposes. We consider here much-debated phenomena such as native advertising (Carlson 2014), political campaigning utilizing the personalization and algorithmic capacities of big data and social media (Enli and Moe 2015), or propaganda and fake news (Nielsen and Graves 2017). Analysis of co-option of audiences' attention focuses the spotlight on the forces behind and processes of such co-option, but investigating this with perspectives from audience research ensures more nuanced understandings of risks, vulnerabilities, and opportunities for critical responses.

Last but not least, these more material practices are accompanied also by affective, emotional practices of immaterial labor. These practices and their significance in digital communication spaces has attracted the interest of critical communication scholars (Deuze 2011; Fuchs 2014), as they further connect to notions of self-management and self-regulation as part of neo-liberal ideologies. Other important theoretical convergences come from feminist theories and digital media economics, through critical exploration of how affective labor (Ouellette and Wilson 2011) or relational labor (Baym 2015) are central to the construction and maintenance of digital architectures. We suggest that audience research needs to more fully build relationships with scholarship on digital labor, including both material and immaterial labor in datafied societies, to better understand these dimensions of the co-option of audiences' divergent engagements.

## Doing Audience Research in the Interest of Audiences

Finally, our fifth priority is *the incorporation of longstanding and new priorities of audience research with priorities in other fields, emphasizing the ambition of audience research to speak in the interest of audiences in diverse global, cultural, political, and scholarly contexts*. We argue, first, that audience research is crucial to understand the impact of diverse technological, political, cultural, and social transformations on the societies of the future, and particularly central to emphasizing how these transformations affect and engage people in their everyday lives. It has long been a central justification for studying media and communication that these phenomena are meaningful and significant to people as individuals, and as members of groups, communities, and societies. They are also complex phenomena entangled in societal structures, encompassing material to abstract dimensions, and taking on various meanings in shifting

contexts. With the technological developments associated with intrusive technologies, datafication, and the Internet of Things, we see not only greater permeation of media and technology in social life but also greater variation and complexity. The perspective audience research offers for understanding these developments is to start with and focus on the people who experience them, as Sonia Livingstone reminded us in her keynote at the Audiences 2030 conference in 2017, with her metaphor of the Church and the Steeple being broken down to find within the ruins—the real point of it all— the people (Livingstone 2017).

Second, we argue that audience research should speak in the interest of audiences in diverse global, cultural, political, and scholarly contexts. Our field has seen challenging debates on methodological, theoretical, and ethical difficulties involved with representing the voices of audiences through research (Ang and Hermes 1991; Radway 1988). We are not suggesting that audience research should speak for audiences as replacements of their own voices, but we signal a commitment to speak out *in the interest of* audiences as we propose renewed attention to power structures, inequalities, and divides. Connected data produced through processes of metrification are not only objects of commercial and political interest but also potentially rich sources for research. However, taking care that audiences, as subjects of our research, do not lose their voice, or their privacy in the conduct of research on new, connected technologies, is central. Techniques for scraping data and converting voices into data do not make way for a necessarily blameless audience research, begging our attention on the politics of knowledge production itself.

Third, this conversation on ethics ties in also with any attempt to truly globalize the advancements and priorities for audience research. Intrusive technologies and newer literacies attendant to the rise of datafication and the ubiquity of the Internet of Things are likely to be experienced differentially across the globe, related to inequalities on local, national, and global scales. These raise essential questions about knowledge production (Tufte 2017), concept generation, and methodology alike. Over and above acts of individual commitment to researching audiences in the global South (Mankekar 1999; Ong 2015; Parameswaran 2001 amongst others), more systematic efforts are needed to address intellectual gaps, which are the outcome of structural inequalities such as uneven research funding, for instance, between the North and South. At the time of writing this article, Mohan Dutta and Mohuya Pal are seeking to do precisely this, in their special issue of *Communication Theory* on "Theorizing Communication from the South." Also, when scholars funded by the Western academy travel to the global south, collect data, and bring it back to the Western academy, for publication in journals or heftily priced books, which will primarily be accessed within a specific group of largely Western institutions that can afford this access, there is an ethical question that arises about the default beneficiaries of this new, hopefully, global audience research.

In formulating this priority, we have been inspired by Ien Ang, writing about the politics of empirical audience research:

> The position of the researcher is also more than that of the professional scholar: beyond being a capable interpreter she or he is also inherently a political and moral subject. As an

intellectual s/he is responsible not only to the Academy, but to the social world s/he lives in as well, consciously or unconsciously so. (Ang 1996, 39)

When Ang wrote in the 1990s about the politics of empirical audience research, she asked, "how do we conduct audience research which is on the side of the audience?" (Ang 1996, 45). This, we suggest, is a critical and timely question to be asking ourselves today. We need a commitment across individual and collaborative audience research projects to ensure that the outcomes and relevance of audience research projects are communicated with those who address, define, assume, speak for, measure, and use audience attention and work. As Marc Raboy et al. (2001) argued, "academic research in communication has not had a significant impact on public policy" (Raboy et al. 2001, 96). We need a reminder today of the dangers of the assumed and implied audience (Lunt and Livingstone 2012), returning repeatedly today in discussions of harm, offense, politics, and electoral behavior, including swings to the right across countries in recent years—harking back to images of the mindless audience. This means asking how audiences are "heard" if at all in policy-relevant research, considering the vast majority of critical audience research is qualitative and produces a certain kind of rich findings. So, it is timely also to ask, "If we are going to conduct audience research on the side of the audience, how do we make qualitative-policy-relevant research happen and matter?"

## Conclusion

We have suggested and discussed five priorities in an unfolding agenda for audience research, in the context of intrusive media and emergent technologies including the Internet of Things. The five priorities point to empirical and conceptual challenges for audience researchers in observing and critiquing the developments associated with emergent technologies and the Internet of Things. Together, the priorities told a story that began with intrusive interfaces and technologies. It then moved on to the interpretive work happening around these interfaces and affordances in these emergent technologies, as we spoke of sense-making practices, self-management, technology-management and coping strategies as an inroad into critical literacies, political dimensions of resistance, and both fundamental and emerging audience practices and acts of engagement. The story, at this point, wary of over-celebrating divergence and interpretive diversity, returned once again to the complexities of institution-audience relationships in datafied societies, through political-economic considerations of im/material labor.

Another way of conceptualizing this story is to draw on theories of structuration and the key concepts of structure and agency, as formulated by Giddens (1984). Essentially, the priorities told a story that began with structure but soon wove in audience agency in its diverse material and immaterial forms, and returned to structure again, drawing attention to the materiality of the very architectural structures within and against which audiences must work (Siles and Boczkowski 2012; Woolgar 2002), including the political-economic contexts of power, labor, and co-option. The story

concluded with the structures of knowledge production itself, paying attention to the politics arising around the conditions of doing audience research and to making sure our findings are heard in the "right" places, reiterating the scope and ambitions of our field at yet another wave of technological transformations, and returning to reminders of doing research in the interest of audiences.

## Note

1. The Consortium on Emerging Directions in Audience Research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the United Kingdom, running for three years between 2015 and 2017. The network was directed by Ranjana Das and Brita Ytre-Arne, and conducted a three-step foresight analysis project asking what the futures of audiences and audience research might look like in 2030. The network's first exercise was an analysis of emerging trends in audience studies, arriving at a set of four key trends. These were carried into a consultative exercise with fifty-one stakeholders across Europe, investigating their experiences, priorities, and questions around these trends, and their ideas and anticipations of the future. The third exercise was a horizon-scanning exercise, which developed four scenarios for the future of audiences in 2030, in a context of rapid datafication and the ubiquity of the Internet of Things, paying attention to the uptake of technological innovations and the changing relationships between audiences, the state, and private organizations. The outcomes of these exercises have been published in a variety of places, but a key resource is the network's book *The Future of Audiences*, published in 2018 by Palgrave Macmillan. For more details, please visit www.cedarahrc.com.

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