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Annette Hill, Peter Lunt (eds.): The Routledge Companion to Media Audiences

KEYWORDS

fan studies, media studies, media audiences, affect, engagement, participation, methodology

AUTHOR

Anne Ganzert is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Konstanz, Germany. Her teaching, research, and publications focus on TV Studies, Fan Studies, and Participation Theory.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1691-8898>

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Annette Hill, Peter Lunt (eds.): The Routledge Companion to Media Audiences
London/New York: Routledge 2024, 581 pp., ISBN 9781032214665, GBP 164,-

The Routledge Companion to Media Audiences, edited by Annette Hill and Peter Lunt, offers a comprehensive and timely overview of contemporary theories, methodologies, and research areas within media audience studies. Bringing together 40 contributions from international scholars, the volume promises an interdisciplinary and global perspective on media use, reception, and participation. Most chapters emphasize empirical research or targeted theoretical reflection, framed by the editors as opportunities to creatively and critically engage with the concept of media audiences in relation to varied research contexts (cf. p.xvii). Notably, the volume emerged from a collaborative process involving critical workshops, which fostered an unusually high degree of productive cross-referencing among the contributions.

The editors consciously place their book in the context of new media structures. Well-known approaches to audience studies are updated to include contemporary parameters such as mobile, ubiquitous, and social media. “As audiences engage with media, including artificial intelligence and related technologies, they are encountering and dealing with expanded resources for viewing, listening, and interpreting their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. These various modes of audience-hood intersect across transmedia and transnational platforms, all of which, in various ways and under different conditions to linear media, provide the impetus for revision, review, and reflection for audience research” (p.1).

Structured into seven thematic sections, the book addresses theoretical foundations, imagined audiences, modes of reception, engagement and experience, affect and identity, spatial contexts, and methodological approaches to audience research. The framework introduces two central concepts—layering and friction—to organize the multiple “verbs for what audiences do” (p.3). However, it remains unclear why the widely used concepts of media, fan, or audience practices are not foregrounded. Each section is curated by a dedicated editor who typically provides an introductory overview of the section’s thematic or theoretical orientation.

The first section, “Audience Theories and Approaches,” deals with theoretical approaches to media audience research in the context of the shift from mass communication to global digital media. In his introduction, section editor Lunt clarifies that the “chapters in this part seek to understand audiences in the digital and social media age in the context of powerful global media corporations and transnational media sensitive to the need to move beyond a media-centric approach to audience research” (p.20). The first chapter of this section, written by David Morley, emphasizes the continued relevance of a cultural studies approach due to a more diverse and location-independent media consumption today. The authors of the following chapters also emphasize that the connection between production conditions and interpretive social positions remains despite technological and social changes. The authors question established Western research paradigms, as in “De-Westernizing Fan Studies in the Era of Globalization and Digitization” (Gong), and emphasize the relevance of non-Western media and audience theories, for example through analyses from Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East (Muñoz-González/Siles; Sakr).

In addition, the authors reflect on the adaptability of classical approaches to the changing media landscape and advocate for a stronger interdisciplinary orientation of media audience research, for example by applying the semiotic approach of C.S. Peirce and Erving Goffman's frame analyses (Andacht).

The second section of the volume, "Audience Imaginaries," is edited by Deborah Chambers and examines how the media industry and the scientific community deal with the increasing fragmentation of media audiences. The contributions show that digitalization and globalization are changing both the notion of the audience and the methods of its recording by media producers, researchers, and recipients themselves, whereby media-industrial and academic images of the audience often stand in tension to one another (Picone). Topics such as algorithmic distortions, the role of social media, and the emotional dimension of audience participation make it clear that audience research not only involves quantitative data analysis but also the questioning of social imaginings. The contributions on journalistic-audience relations are particularly enriching in this regard (Nenadić/Kovačević; Nelson). In addition, gamers are discussed in particular (Cote/Butt), the user debate is continued (Picone), and the potential for division of anti-fans is also addressed (Boisvert/Gagnon).

"Audience Modes," the third part of the volume, is dedicated to the diverse modes in which media audiences experience content and in doing so challenge traditional Anglo-American theories such as impact research, cultural studies, and reception research. Particular attention is paid to the creativity of viewers who actively participate in media production, modify content, or use it for social and political purposes. In her contribution, section editor Renira Rampazzo Gambarato examines activist forms of 'anti-storytelling,' Rafal Zaborowski deals with virtual singing talents and the canons of Japanese idols, and Susana Tosca analyzes 'extreme' forms of immersive media experiences and practices. Other contributions discuss the role of gender-bending fashion in TV series (Mascio), boredom and media consumption in digital culture (Paasonen). Themes such as fan creativity, parasocial interaction, and the performative staging of identity in social media run like a common thread through the contributions, as do emotional dimensions of media experience and affective collective processes.

The fourth section of the volume, edited by Hill, examines "Audience Engagement and Experiences" by contrasting institutional measurement methods such as audience ratings with critical perspectives from fan and movement research (Corner). Craig Hight and Kate Nash show how social, political, and technological factors influence media experiences and what role documentaries play in imparting democratic values. Sue Turnbull criticizes the rhetorical strategy of playing the 'audience card' in political discourses, i.e., when speaking on behalf of an imagined audience in order to legitimize political measures. She uses examples from the debate about national film and television productions in Australia and the moral panic surrounding sex and the media to show that such arguments often ignore empirical facts; instead, she calls for a research-based examination of actual audience realities. Elizabeth Evans, in turn, turns to an update of 'transmedia audiences' and argues that, above all, the plurality of content, people, contexts, and media must be given even more consideration and that, therefore, audience studies are essential for contemporary transmedia research. Finally, Anastasia Kavada looks at digital strategies of social movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter, with a particular focus on the tension between audience autonomy, mediated vulnerability, and the influence of media structures.

The fifth section, edited by Joke Hermes, deals with "Audiences, Affect and Identities" from a cultural studies perspective. The intersection of class and gender, which is performatively and experimentally visible in fan practices, is central to the first two chapters of this section (Gray; Wood). Francesca Sobande



looks at identity construction and attribution on the part of producers, specifically through marketing to, or the exclusion of, PoC audiences. In particular, the nexus of affect, identity, and digital capitalism (see also Chow's contribution) raises questions about the actual agency of the audience, since the economic and technological structures that shape these dynamics are often overlooked, especially in the everyday use of digital media (De Ridder).

In her introduction to the sixth section, "Audience Places and Environments," Emily Keightley emphasizes the importance of space and place for media experiences in an increasingly digitized world, precisely because "well established distinctions and definitions [are] being destabilized, including between domestic, work and public spaces, between physical and virtual places, and the very concept of home itself" (p.421). The following contributions shed light on how media shape the relationship between audiences and spatial anchoring and what role questions of power, belonging, and experience play in this. Maren Hartmann and Vera Klocke discuss the challenges of homelessness in a media-driven environment, María Concepción Castillo-González and Mariana Gabarrot analyze the conditions of feminist activism in digital spaces. Reading examines the media engagement practice of neurodivergent audiences, while Hill and Yunyi Liao look at 'slow affect' in Chinese reality TV formats during the pandemic. Peter Lunt complements these perspectives in his theory-spiked text with a phenomenological analysis of media events as interactional, atmospheric experiences.

The contributions of the *Companion's* final section aim to answer or at least critically reflect on the methodological questions of audience research in contemporary and future media contexts (Scharrer/Ruddock). The 'intricate reality' of today's transnational media-cultural fabric presents researchers with new challenges (Johansson/Bengtsson; Lee/Swan), so that Lynn Schofield Clark, in her introduction to the section, describes the methods of audience research as an art form that is less about uncovering truths and more about understanding and representing the world. The contributions reflect the changing approaches in audience research, for example, with regard to indigenous audience perspectives and the Global South, as well as the impact of big data. Cheryll Ruth Soriano and Earvin Charles Cabalquinto add a new facet to Axel Bruns' produser analysis by using the interplay of Filipino social media users as an example of cooperative media production. Schofield Clark, Carlos Jimenez, and Johnny Ramirez provide almost auto-ethnographic insights into their research on young adults; and Esra E. Bilgiç reflects on the research methods of her work on children's internet use.

Within the broader context of methodological innovation, fan studies emerge as a particularly rich site for reflecting on the tools, ethics, and positionalities involved in audience research. Several contributions engage with fans not merely as enthusiastic consumers but as complex, reflexive participants in media culture whose practices challenge traditional notions of authorship, value, and expertise. The methods used here range from ethnographic immersion and digital fieldwork to participatory and auto-ethnographic approaches, often blurring the line between researcher and subject. This is particularly evident in studies that consider marginalized or non-Western fan communities, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive, flexible research designs. Moreover, the methodological attention to affect, identity performance, and networked publics within fan studies underscores the field's contribution to developing nuanced approaches to studying audience engagement across diverse platforms and sociocultural contexts.

The Routledge Companion to Media Audiences is an indispensable resource for students and scholars in media audience studies, fan studies, and adjacent fields. It succeeds in bridging foundational theory with contemporary developments, offering both critical reassessments and fresh empirical insights.

While some chapters stand out for their innovative engagement with current case studies, others reinforce the need to revisit and update canonical frameworks. Thus, the volume's target audience can be read in many different ways, just like so many of the cited, studied, and addressed audiences. Nevertheless, the volume's breadth and depth make it a landmark publication that will likely become a standard reference in the field.

