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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0267323114565743>

PUBLISHER

Sage Publications / © The Authors

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Mihelj, Sabina, and Jerome Bourdon. 2019. "Doing Audience History: Questions, Sources, Methods." figshare.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2134/16344>.

European Journal of Communication
Special Issue on Historicizing Audiences

Doing Audience History: Questions, Sources, Methods

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Audience history poses a methodological as well as an intellectual challenge. Everyday practices of readers, viewers and listeners are typically beyond the remit of sources found in institutional archival collections, and the researcher is often left with a plethora of sources that only marginally address the object of study, and rarely amount to a clear-cut, homogeneous understanding of audiences and their historical practices. Contemporary audience surveys, documents produced by governmental, administrative and legal bureaucracies, professional testimonies, oral history interviews and other sources each offer their own vision of the audience. How does one move beyond these multiple, often contradictory visions, to a reasonably coherent history of the actual everyday practices and thoughts of media users? Given the overwhelming variety, yet in some sense also paucity of relevant sources, it is of no surprise that media historiography has often given preference to safer fields: the history of institutions and media content. Recent years have of course seen some notable advances in the field of audience historiography – most prominently Richard Butsch's (2000) path-breaking study of American audiences in the 19th and the 20th century, Butsch and Livingstone's (2013) the edited collection exploring the variegated meanings of audiences historically and globally, as well as the fast growing body of historical studies of film reception and movie-going (e.g. Staiger 1992, Stacey 1994, Maltby *et al.* 2007, Kuhn 2004). Nonetheless, it is fair to say that historical research on media audiences is still in its infancy. There have been only very few attempts to systematically address its key concerns and methodological principles (see Biltereyst *et al.* 2012 for an exception), and the empirical focus of existing work has been somewhat uneven, with most research focusing on film and cinema-going and much less on broadcasting, for instance. Furthermore, despite the growth of single country case studies from beyond the western world, we have yet to develop a more synthetic and explanatory account of the differences and similarities between audience histories globally.

This themed issue seeks to encourage the development of historical research of media audiences by addressing a number epistemological and methodological problems it poses.¹ It opens with a general paper that discusses the epistemological challenges posed by audience history, followed by five empirically grounded papers that consider different ways of 'doing' audience history, ranging from the history of ideas to oral history approaches. Each of these contributions considers the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen method or approach, and then demonstrates its use through a case study. Consistent with the ethos of the journal that has European in its title the case studies span the European continent, and range from France, Belgium and Sweden to communist Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Most of the contributions focus on television audiences – a conscious choice that addresses the relative paucity of existing research on television in this field while at the same time providing sufficient consistency and coherence to allow the reader to draw meaningful comparisons and links between contributions.

While offering a review of the rich developments in the field over the last ten years, Jérôme Bourdon's opening article tackles three key epistemological problems faced by a media historian interested in studying audiences – the difficulty to define the object of study, the tendency to reduce it to representations (textualism), and the preponderance of ready-made

dichotomous narratives about the audience. His article starts by discussing the concept of audience, tracing its historical roots and suggesting that all audiences have both objective and subjective dimensions. It then lays out the key tenets of the textualist position and moves on to refute it. It offers a thorough panorama of the different categories of sources available to a historian of audiences and the way they should be combined. It ends with a discussion of the way historians should deal with the 'grand narratives' of the audiences, which typically obscure more than they reveal. To tackle these narratives, Bourdon argues that media historians should resist the temptation of using them as analytical tools, and instead treat them as objects of analysis.

One such 'grand narrative' – the one that pits active audiences against passive ones – is addressed in Sabina Mihelj's contribution to the volume. Her article focuses on audience history as a history of ideas. It examines the benefits and shortcomings of such an approach and develops a set of methodological propositions, drawing on the principles of the German tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts). Like Bourdon, Mihelj rejects the textualist position and argues for a history of ideas that situates representations within the context of audience reception practices, as well as within broader social, political, economic and technological developments. To demonstrate the usefulness of such an approach, the article briefly examines the ideas about audiences in socialist Yugoslavia, focusing on the surge of ideas about politically engaged audiences in the late 1960s. The concluding part of the article situates this historical episode in the wider geographical context and outlines possible avenues for a broader, transnational investigation of the history of ideas about audiences.

Cécile Méadel's article shifts the focus from the history of ideas to the history of methods and technologies. Her contribution examines the history of audience measurement technology, using an approach inspired by Actor Network Theory. In line with previous contributions, Méadel rejects the notion that the audience exists only in the form of its representations, and instead draws attention to numerous practices enabled by television, and performed by both human and non-human actors: measurements of audience preferences by means of particular technological tools, specific practices of collective or solitary television viewing etc. However, she does not consider the audience as a 'pre-existing' historical object, but as always constituted, at a given time, by socio-technical arrangements. The article applies this approach to a specific episode of French television history, namely the introduction of the peplemeter in the 1980s. It examines how the different actors involved in introducing the peplemeter translated a particular idea of the audience into a technological system.

Mats Björkin's contribution offers yet another take on audience history, centred on the secondary analysis of historical audience research with the aim to reconstruct the past 'media ecologies' of a particular generation. To do so, argues Björkin, we need to contextualise the results of historical audience surveys in relation to a range of different media, not only television, and consider their use in the broader cultural context. In this way, we can reconstruct the changing media ecologies of a particular generation, tracing their different responses to, and engagements with, a changing media environment over time. These arguments are then applied to the study of the generation of 'television natives' in Sweden, namely the age cohort that was born in the 1960s and grew up with television from an early age.

The remaining two contributions both tackle the challenges and opportunities of investigating the history of reception by drawing on oral histories, but do so with regard to very different socio-political contexts. Alexandre Dhoest's article examines the early Flemish television audiences in twentieth century Belgium. He analyses the connections between the present, the past and the structure of personal biography in television memories. He argues that oral history interviews constitute an invaluable source for a historical inquiry into audience

experiences, not because of their accuracy but because they represent first-hand insights in the significance of television for audiences of the past.

Irena Reifová's contribution brings us back to Eastern Europe, and considers the pros and cons of using oral history interviews for the purpose of investigating audience reception in communist Czechoslovakia. As Dhoest, Reifová argues that the advantages brought by oral history outweigh its weaknesses. Her article also has the more general aim of challenging widespread assumptions about communist audiences, which reduce them either to gullible victims of propaganda or to outspoken dissidents capable of challenging the dominant media message at every turn. By examining the recollections of socialist television serials broadcast in the 1970s and the 1980s, she demonstrates that the spectators did not simply 'swallow the propagandist hook', but modified and appropriated the ideological credos of the programmes in accordance with their own experiences.

The collection of methods and approaches to audience history examined in this themed issue is by no means exhaustive. Nonetheless, we hope that together, these articles will provide an incentive for further work in this field, as well as for a more methodologically and epistemologically reflexive ways of doing audience history.

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ⁱ Early versions of these papers were presented in a conference panel organised as part of the European Communication Research and Education Association in Istanbul 2012. We are grateful to the audience as well as to all the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.