Taking Audience Research into the Age of New Media:

Old problems and new challenges
Introduction

It is sometimes thought that audience research is dead, for all sorts of reasons. In the age of multiple screens, it is difficult to pinpoint when people become audiences. And, in the wake of postmodern theorizing about the fluidity of our identities, it is difficult to know how to frame questions about the interaction of media with people which can be investigated empirically. In the midst of all this confusion, we have begun a comparative ethnographic project on young people. Foremost in our minds is a consciousness of the continuities and breaks with our previous experience as television audience researchers. So, we are thinking about methodological approaches to audience study, and in particular, what methods are appropriate for audience researchers to use in the age of the internet?

In the discussion which follows, we ask first why was active audience research so significant? Concomitantly, we ask why did media theory come to see empirical, qualitative audience research as important? This sets the scene for our current dilemma: must audience research start all over again with the internet, or can ideas, methods, and findings be carried forward, so we don’t reinvent the wheel? In short, we examine the parallels between researching audiences for television and for the internet, identifying the similarities and differences in the trajectories of the two bodies of research. Of course, the people are the same – the television audience has now transmogrified into the internet audience. There’s some overlap in research communities: although not all television researchers are making this move, many others are joining in the study of internet use. Most important, the theory of television audiences always involved larger concepts – concerned with people’s engagement with mediated texts – that went beyond the phenomenon of television, particularly national mass broadcast television. That theory now needs rethinking in the age of the internet.

While qualitative, ethnographic work on television took a while to get started, the field has now grown to a substantial size, establishing a recognized tradition of enquiry. Many scholars are now turning their interest to new media, facing some of the same quandaries we ourselves are as we try to translate television audience issues into a new domain. This paper is designed to address the differences, if any, between the issues facing those who attempt to study the audience
for new media, and the issues we faced as scholars of the television audience. Are the skills we’ve developed as scholars of the television audience transferable to the study of new media? Are the questions which oriented our study the same? What are the new issues that need to be investigated, the new questions that must be posed? And do these issues and questions require new methodological skills and strategies by audience researchers? We select from each field – qualitative studies of television viewers, and qualitative studies of internet users - discussing several pioneering works which we argue have been, and continue to be, influential in the field of audience reception. In doing so we attempt to review the answers to these questions that others have given as they’ve entered this new field of audience research, and identify some new directions we feel the current research should be taking.

**On the continued importance of audience research**

In an age of new information and communication media, why persist with a theory developed in the age of mass broadcasting? The reason is, primarily, that we find huge existing strengths in theory, method and findings. These strengths are essentially two-fold, together accounting for the recent successes of audience research:

(a) the introduction of the ethnographic tradition into the field of media and communications – the advantages of this work include its interdisciplinarity, the richness of its data and insights, its ability to integrate the study of text and viewer, contextualization, and the development of a critical tradition of media studies, particularly in integration with a program of empirical studies; and

(b) the substantive arguments developed within audience research and their critical intervention into theories of dominant media power, which are largely based in either or both of political economy and textual studies, theories including the theory of media imperialism, globalization discussions, etc.

To develop these arguments, we need first to tell a brief history. To begin, active audience research is significant because it challenged the grand claims about dominant ideology (with the theory of encoding/decoding; Hall 1980), media imperialism (Liebes and Katz 1995), and media
power (with Katz’s oscillation between powerful media and powerful audiences, 1980). Hence, empirical audience research posed ideas of heterogeneity against homogenization, of active against passive, of resistant against exploited audiences. Theoretically, this was exciting, influential. Methodologically, this set the scene for the ethnographic turn in audience work.

Television audience study emerged out of a concept of the mass audience, and initially the questions posed placed the audience in a passive position. Audience members were surveyed, subjects of experiments, and basically treated as atomized, vulnerable, exploited members of a mass group. In response to what researchers identified as an overly passive characterization of the television audience, the tradition of active audience study emerged. This tradition posed questions about the audience which emphasized the creative response of audience members to the media in question. According to theories of the active audience, broad sweeping generalizations about the dangers of the media had suffered from the lack of close attention paid to audience activity. The new type of close analysis, carried out by researchers trained in the traditions of qualitative and ethnographic methodologies, indicated that there were subtle aspects to the interaction between audience and the media that could add crucial information to both textual analysis as well as survey research. Audience members sometimes used media, and interpreted media, in diverse, unexpected, and creative ways that belied the hegemonic media influence that textual analysts so often hypothesized. There were some lively, occasionally hostile arguments between those who argued for the importance of audience ethnography, and those who argued that audience ethnography was beside the point, and could not add to the knowledge derived either from sophisticated textual analysis, or from large-scale quantitative survey data (e.g. Seaman, 1992; Neuman, 1991).

One of the most interesting arguments was the exchange between Janice Radway, one of the first to investigate audiences ethnographically in her widely cited Reading the Romance (1984a), and Tania Modleski, a textual analyst who, in a review of Radway’s book tore into what she termed the “empiricist” notion that the researcher could “learn” anything new from a sociological investigation of audience members. Using research findings that she herself had reached using the method of textual analysis, Modleski argued that Radway’s own conclusions did not really blaze new ground, despite the difference in their research methodology (Modleski 1985). In a heated exchange, Radway (1984b) foreshadowed the conclusion of the field that in fact, ethnographic methods yielded material which supported a much more subversive interpretation
of media influence than that garnered through textual analysis, offering her own data as the first in a line of arguments illustrating the active, subversive ways audience members used the mass media to support activities which undermined their hegemony. One of Radway’s key arguments had been that women romance readers used their reading time to carve out time away from the demands of their families and the constrictions of their role within the family. This time was for many their only independent, self-directed time, in a life of extensive demands placed upon them by their families. Moreover, this led them to interpret the romance texts in a particular manner, resolving the polysemy of the texts themselves so as to draw out a message of the heroine’s independence and self-worth rather than one of her subordination to the male hero. Without empirical data from audience research, Radway argued, these kinds of arguments would have been neither anticipated nor found convincing.

Radway’s arguments foreshadowed a new era, one in which research on what came to be defined as the “active audience” revealed that television audiences could creatively appropriate mass media for their own goals and purposes. While audiences did not always use media in such creative and often subversive ways, the growing body of research based on qualitative studies of the audience increasingly argued that audiences could and sometimes did resist the hegemonic impact of the media, precisely because the texts themselves are structurally indeterminate, awaiting the interpretive activities of particular audiences. Thus the active audience tradition overall radically challenged prior scholarship theorizing the role of the media, particularly those who overestimated, or simply “read off”, the extent and nature of media influence from an analysis of media production or texts.

The ethnographic turn: Contextualism and its relevance today

‘The qualities and experiences of being a member of an audience have begun to leak out from specific performance events which previously contained them, into the wider realms of everyday life’ (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 36-7).

As the media environment becomes ever more diverse and complex, ever more thoroughly embedded in all aspects of daily life, those studying media audiences have become concerned about the charge of media-centrism. The result has been a more systematic exploration of the
contexts of media use, moving ever further away from the medium itself in search of the local sites of cultural meaning-making which shape people’s orientation to the media. Several arguments led to this shift in focus from text to context, from literary/semiotic analysis to social analysis. As Robert Allen (1987) argued, once textual and literary theorists had made the crucial transition to a reader-oriented approach, context flooded in for two reasons: first, the shift from asking about meaning of the text in and of itself to asking about the meaning of the text as achieved by a particular, contextualized reader (i.e. the shift, in Eco's terms, from the virtual to the realized text); second, the shift from asking about the meaning of the text to asking about the intelligibility of the text (i.e. about the diversity of socio-cultural conditions which determine how a text can make sense).

Although a crucial transition was made, these should not be posed as either/or options, for the moment of reception is located precisely at the interface between textual and social determinations and so requires a dual focus on media content and audience response. Research must, in short, contextualize the reception of television texts in order to understand how audience activities carry the meanings communicated far beyond the moment of reception into many other spheres of everyday life, and it must also examine the converse process by which reception is shaped through the symbolic practices of everyday life. This argument has taken a more dramatic turn, however, following Janice Radway’s (1988) call for ‘radical contextualism’ in audience research, namely the analytic displacement of the moment of text-reader reception by ethnographic studies of the everyday – what she describes as 'the kaleidoscope of daily life' (Radway, 1988: 366; see also Ang, 1996: 250-1) or, for Paul Willis, 'the whole way of life' (1990).

Following these arguments, the ‘ethnographic turn’ in audience research shifts the focus away from a detailed analysis of the moment of textual interpretation and towards the contextualization of that moment in the culture of the everyday. Starting with an account of the context of media use, rather than with a semiotic reading of a media text, ethnographic audience studies have explored the ways in which media goods are rendered meaningful insofar as they are positioned in a particular kind of place within the home, the domestic timetable, the family’s communication ecology. Research shows that this process of active appropriation shapes, enables or restricts the uses and meanings of the medium for its audience or users, across a wide
range of media (see, for example, Moyal 1995 on the telephone, Kramarae 1988 and Spigel 1992 on television, and Flichy 1995, on the increasingly media-rich home).

An analysis of the trajectory of David Morley’s work illustrates the conundrum in which audience research finds itself following the ethnographic turn. Following the analysis of the text of a British current affairs program (Brundson and Morley, 1978), in The Nationwide Audience (1980) Morley investigated the reception of a particular episode of the show by organizing focus groups of viewers related only by their membership in common socioeconomic and occupational categories (e.g. housewives, bank clerks, etc.). Although we learned rather little about the role of this program and its meanings in any of their lives, the respondents’ interpretation of the episode revealed the interaction between socio-demographic background and the strategies of openness and closure encoded into the text. In his later work, Family Television (1986), Morley sought to contextualize the use of television in the routines of daily life by interviewing families from different social class positions and observing the dynamics of their television viewing at home. This revealed a range of subtle and not so subtle gender- and generation-based tactics of power within the home but, unlike the earlier project, added little to our understanding of the reception of television texts.

The contrast between these two projects foreshadows divisions which mark the field of audience research today. Through the concept of double articulation, Roger Silverstone (1994) contrasts the media qua material objects such as the television or walkman, namely as technological objects located in particular spatio-temporal settings, with the media qua texts such as the news or the soap opera, namely as symbolic messages located within particular sociocultural discourses. Broadly, to focus on the media-as-object is to invite an analysis of media use in terms of consumption in the context of domestic practices. On the other hand, to focus on the media-as-text is to invite an analysis of the textuality or representational character of media contents in relation to the interpretive activities of particular audiences. The implication, clearly, is that the audience is also doubly articulated - as the consumer-viewer. Yet unexpectedly perhaps, researching audiences simultaneously in terms of reception and contexts of use seems hard to sustain methodologically. In the classic figure-ground illustration of the Gestalt theorists, we can see either two heads facing each other with a gap in between, or we can see a vase in what was the space between while the surrounding objects become background. Understanding audiences in terms of either what's surrounding, or what's on, the screen is similar. The further one stands
back from the television set to focus on the context of the living room, the smaller the screen
appears and the harder it is to see what’s showing on it (Livingstone, 2003a). And as a result,
reception studies and ethnographic/consumption studies – taking as their starting point text and
context respectively – seem to diverge rather than complement each other.

But of course, audiences are both interpreters of media-as-text and users of media-as-object. The
activities associated with the symbolic and material uses of media each shape the other as part
and parcel of everyday life. Theoretically, ethnographic and reception studies of audiences draw
on the same insights - the stress on active audiences making contingent and context-dependent
choices, on plurality (or fragmentation) within the population rather than assuming a normative
mass audience, on the idea of audiences as co-producers rather than merely consumers of the
meanings of media, and so forth. Hence, it should not be so hard as it seems to be to keep both
reception and use in the frame simultaneously. Indeed, although this bifurcation continues to
haunt current audience research, some of those developing an ethnographic approach can and do
address both of these issues simultaneously.

**Media ethnography: A developing tradition**

Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984a) is most often cited as the cornerstone of media
ethnography for its combined analysis of text, audience reception and context of use. Radway
gathered her informants, conceived as an interpretive community, from the patrons of a local
bookstore, run by someone she called “Dot” who wrote a newsletter about new romances for her
customers. These women had, for the most part, never met one another before, only coming
together when Radway organized them for group interviews, though all had communicated
beforehand with Dot and were readers of her newsletter. While Radway’s work is universally
cited as an example of media “ethnography,” it lacks some of the classic features of ethnographic
work, the primary one being that the researcher accesses a physically existing community within
which its members interact based on some type of socially defined interrelationships. For
Radway, the “community” was defined by her respondents’ common reception of a media
product, in this case, romance novels. They belonged to an imagined community of “fans” or
avid readers of these products. Although they lived in a nearby area (which would define their
patronage of this particular bookshop that Dot ran), they had no other interconnection with each
other in the physical world, except perhaps by chance when they entered Dot’s bookstore.
The questions that Radway’s project raises, regarding the nature of community as well as the nature of the research process, illustrate some long-term confusions among those studying media audiences regarding the meaning of the term “ethnography” (Nightingale 1996; Press 1996). If we look at some of the key texts generally considered to be works of media ethnography, we find the methods they use, and the treatment of individuals and communities which result, differ in various ways, often radically so from more conventional ethnographic methodology within anthropology. So, for example, Ien Ang’s first book, Watching Dallas (1985), often cited as one of the first examples of media ethnography, is based on an imagined community of viewers of the prime-time soap opera Dallas, and Ang accessed them individually through letters they wrote in response to a newspaper advertisement she placed requesting that fans of the show write to her to explain why they liked watching it. Of course, Ang could not be sure that the respondents to her advertisement had never met one another before, but her method precluded an investigation of this – and other - aspects of their identity (for example, their race, social class, age or family circumstances). Years later, Elizabeth Bird appropriated Ang’s method in her work, For Enquiring Minds (1992), once again sampling through written responses to a newspaper advertisement the opinions of readers of such tabloids as the National Enquirer. Bird followed up her research by conducting telephone interviews with some of the respondents, but this does not solve the problem of informant invisibility. Both of these works were sorely lacking in the contextualization necessary for genuine ethnographic work.

So, audience research had in any case encountered some conceptual and methodological problems even before it turned to face the changing media environment. More recently, there have been more concerted attempts to employ the ethnographic methods of traditional anthropology, interestingly combined with the methods of media reception research. Some of the best examples include Gillespie (1995), who studied how television and video are used to recreate cultural traditions within the “South Asian” diaspora in London, Seiter’s (1999) exploration of the meanings of cartoons and other genres for young children – and their teachers – in nursery school, and Mankekar (1999), who looked at issues of women’s identity in relation to television viewing in India. In these highly contextualized studies, the bifurcation between media-as-object and the study of media reception is in large part overcome. These books serve as a model of contextualized ethnography, in that they investigate communities of viewers linked in the physical world in other ways besides their media consumption. Based on many months of
participant observation coupled with extensive interviewing, in strong contrast to the more usual single or limited series of interviews with unconnected viewers, these authors do succeed in gaining a grounded sense of the role of media in their informants’ lives, offering a series of critical insights into the processes of media reception and use.

**Extending the reception tradition to internet use: The challenges ahead**

How shall we take what we know of audiences into the new field of internet use? Thinking back to the early days of audience research, we note that the field of mass communication distinguished itself from interpersonal or face-to-face communication precisely because of the socially, economically and culturally institutionalized break between production and reception in mass, but not interpersonal, communication. Historically, as this institutionalized break became more technologically complex, more economically successful and more culturally taken-for-granted, the audience was gradually transformed from what Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) term the simple audience through the lengthy phase of the mass audience which defined our twentieth ideas of media research, to what they now term the diffused audience of the new media environment. For today, as Fornas et al (2002: 25) argue, interactive media ‘blur the distinction between production and reception as communication moments, as institutionalized forms of practice, and as research areas’ (2002: 25). No longer have we clear distinctions between production and reception, between mass and interpersonal communication, or between hitherto distinct forms of media (print, image, music, broadcasting, games, etc).

The challenge posed to the field of media research by the growth of new forms of media leads some to stress the difficulties to be faced. Jones (2002) addresses the particular difficulties of internet scholarship – difficulties of interdisciplinarity, of the status of research, of audience research, and so forth. On a more positive note, Fornas et al (2002: 1) characterize the new field thus:

“… an expanding tribe of cyber-cultural studies, combining media and cultural studies with internet research. This rapidly growing field crosses and reworks certain traditional borderlines such as those concerning identities, communities, forms of reception or media use, textual genres, media types, technologies, and research methods”.
It is on one of these borderlines – that between forms of reception and media use (or between audiences and users, media-as-text and media-as-object) – that we explore the emerging theories and methods for understanding changing media cultures. And, like Fornas et al, we seek research continuities as well as change, agreeing that ‘just as newer media always connect to older ones, studies of computer media must integrate media and cultural studies to catch what is really bravely new in this digital world’ (Fornas et al. 2002:3). However, we remain cautious in claiming anything as ‘bravely new’ for, as they go on to argue, “tenacious structures in media institutions as well as in everyday-life contexts of use and production work to delimit the transformations first promised by each new medium, reproducing instead certain inherited boundaries in the new media as well” (2002:3). On the other hand, as they also argue, this delimiting work is never entirely successful, so that to some unpredictable but significant extent, the new always escapes the stabilizing grasp of the old ways if only through a series of contingent and unintended consequences. In the end, notwithstanding the grand and overarching theorizations which abound concerning the transformative impact of the internet, Fornas et al. position ethnographic studies as anchoring (old and new) media use in the specifics of actual contexts, thereby resisting technological determinism and legitimating, in the main, contingent, qualified and differentiated claims.

Clearly, when discussing the newness of the internet, its capacity to support interactivity on a huge scale is most striking. Interactivity can itself be usefully subdivided into social interactivity (i.e. interactivity or networking among users, e.g. email), textual interactivity (i.e. interactivity between user and documents via hypertext, e.g. the world wide web) and technical interactivity (i.e. interactivity between user and system, e.g. games) (see Fornas et al 2002; McMillan 2002). Each is associated not only with particular forms of the internet (for this is far from a unified medium) but also with different potential practices of meaningful use. When we compare with the practices associated with older media, it becomes clear that different media foreground different forms of interactivity – it not being interactivity in itself that is qualitatively new – although none of these previous media combine all forms of interactivity, that is, until the internet. So, social interactivity, as defined here, is characteristic of the telephone but not of television except in the indirect sense that viewers talk to each other about what they have seen. Textual interactivity is characteristic of television – this has precisely been the focus of reception studies as they have sought to reveal the complex interpretative engagement between reader and text: on the world wide web, although the strategies for multiple pathways are more directly built
into the structure of hypertext than of the (superficially at least) linear printed text, these are balanced online, as offline, by strategies of closure, preferring and ideological reproduction. Technical interactivity is characteristic neither of the telephone nor television, but has become familiar through video and computer games.

The point we are making is that, in approaching the internet user, research must draw on its understanding of the use of, or audiences for, a range of hitherto quite distinct media. One cannot keep these separate, arguing that the internet represents a collection of parallel media, for as studies of use immediately reveal, users adopt a range of strategies precisely to interlink and integrate these multiple media. They chat on instant message while researching an assignment on the web. They play games in the interstices of a slow-to-download piece of music. And, most important, they exploit the intertextual possibilities of the medium through constantly cross-referring across these multiple activities (Livingstone 2002).

On method and new media

In researching new media, especially to the internet, how far can we learn from the experience of prior audience research, and in what ways must we begin again? To begin with, audience discourses and practices are more elusive because practice is often private – in the bedroom or study - making the audience researcher’s presence even more salient than in the days of observing family television in the living room. Media engagement may be even more transgressive or personal – including pornography, intimate conversations, personal advice, etc. And the use of media is harder to chart than in the days of mass communication – filling in a survey to record an evening’s viewing is tricky, but by no means as tricky as recording and interpreting an evening’s surfing or chat.

This brings us to the as yet little-theorized interpretative relation between text and reader online, which raises both practical and theoretical problems. New media researchers have no stacks of neatly labeled video tapes on their shelves for Coronation Street or The News at Ten, no stacks of newspapers in the corner of the office, no industry records of audience ratings categorized by demographics; rather they barely know how to track their ‘texts’ given the three-fold problems of overwhelming volume of material, temporary existence of material, and its “virtuality”
(hypertext being dependent on users to “actualize” it; c.f. Eco 1979). Further, there are no easy distinctions to be made in terms of channel, form or genre – indeed, there are few textual studies on the basis of which audience research can formulate its questions about people’s interpretation of the texts. Add to this the fact that online, unlike in the audiovisual domain, people can be producers as well as receivers of content, and the extent of the challenge becomes apparent; how shall we record, catalogue and re-present the world wide web? Or internet chat? How shall we illustrate MUDs or computer games to those who haven’t played them? The debates have begun over methods – and ethics – to sample and record a range of online activities, including the conduct of online interviews and surveys (Hine 2000f). And the industry is experimenting with extending television audience measurement to the world wide web at least. But these texts are nonetheless ephemeral; they are nonlinear; we have no established language for units – or genres – let alone for charting people’s use of such texts; people may have always read the paper while watching television, but multitasking on the computer is commonplace since the advent of windows. How are we to capture these activities?

No less problematically, familiar questions of consequences are being asked with some urgency by policy makers and public alike. As with the early days of television (Wartella and Reeves, 1985), this public agenda foregrounds simple effects questions, largely focused on averting harm, and only gradually and reluctantly does it learn to pose more complex questions of meaning and practice. Hence, the research community is asked: does internet use result in harm to children and young people? - does inadvertent exposure to pornography produce long-term harm, does playing violent games online make boys more aggressive, does immersion in a branded consumer culture produce a more materialistic generation, is the internet changing the way children think and learn? – all questions which are impossible to ‘answer’ in any simple fashion. Nonetheless, research is making some varied and thought-provoking beginnings in the task of understanding internet use, as we explore, through selected instances of empirical work, below.

**Researching internet use: First generation studies**

We suggest that empirical studies of internet use currently fall into two main approaches. These are methodologically distinct – one continues the consumption tradition of audience studies, as
discussed above, while one continues the reception tradition. Both (interestingly) claim to be inheritors of the ethnographic turn, albeit in different ways, although one centers on life in front of the screen while the other centers on life on the screen. Hence, while these studies have much to offer, their initial research choices are tending to continue the bifurcation in audience studies. And problematically so, for we still lack studies which integrate reception and consumption, although there have been some moves in this direction.

**Life on the screen**

The first generation of internet studies begins with the online text, often to the exclusion of the context of its consumption. Sherry Turkle’s *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995) is a founding instance of this extension of audience analysis, centering on the textual discussion of the online community. It also makes some sweeping arguments in favor of arguing for the extensive influence of new media technologies on postmodern life, encouraging a postmodern discourse of fluid identities (Radway 1988). Given the impracticability of tracing online texts to a particular physical being in any definite manner, researchers are tempted to assert that anything is possible with an online text – those who in “real” life have male gender identities can assume female ones, the rich can assume the demeanor of the poor, the old can assume the personage of a young person, etc. The only characteristics that cannot be consciously hidden are the literacy skills of the participant – one may be judged by the wittiness, and fluency, of one’s writing, which is harder to hide. This is why online ethnographies, perhaps much more than traditional ones, lend themselves to a very different language of analysis, one more amenable to current modes of theorizing about the fragmentation of life in the postmodern age, and the concomitant fragmentation of identities. However, although researchers studying online communities are very limited in their ability to assess the physical and socioeconomic characteristics of their informants, the advantage is that online ethnographies are based on texts which are already written, as opposed to interview transcripts or participant observation field notes generated by the research process – like other forms of transcripts or field notes, however, these texts must be edited by the analyst, and if not entirely created, are nevertheless located and selected by the studies’ authors, a not inconsiderable undertaking in most cases.

Turkle adopts a type of ethnographic method to investigate how internet use facilitates the increasingly fragmented, multiple experience of identity prototypical of the postmodern age.
Citing a stream of postmodern philosophers and psychologists who argue that our identities are now more fluid than they were half a century ago (she cites Riesman’s Lonely Crowd and its theory of the “inner-directed” for evidence of the “personalities that were”), Turkle provides an engrossing combination of clinical (she was a therapist in a former life) and ethnographic evidence to ground her claims. In each of a series of case-studies, she documents how the use of computers has challenged the type of identity the user had in the pre-computer era, in essence offering him or her a more malleable notion of “self”.

One case Turkle discusses illustrates what we feel are both the strengths and the weaknesses of her line of analysis. This particular case concerns an 18-year-old college student who obtained an abortion. The abortion deeply offended her mother, who was a religious Catholic, and she subsequently entirely cut her daughter off financially. In response to this deeply felt family pain, Turkle argues, the daughter began extensive fantasy play, sometimes for days at a time, on computers. This helped to alleviate the pain of her troubled relationship with her mother, in essence to “work through,” in a therapeutic sense, her unresolved family difficulties, and the pain surrounding them. What is not apparent from Turkle’s discussion was the material surroundings within which this role-playing occurred. We found ourselves questioning the socio-economic aspect of this woman’s reality, questions which Turkle’s emphasis allowed her to evade. How was it possible for the student to spend days in role-playing computer games when her mother had just cut her off entirely financially? Wouldn’t she have had to increase her work hours in order to support herself? What was happening to her studies, her friends, her house mates? We could not get past the unexplained realities of her situation, details we felt were necessary in order to really understand the significance of her computer playing in her life.

Nancy Baym’s (2000) is another example of an online ethnography which uses the online text as the main unit of analysis, a project that clearly follows from the rich vein of research on television audiences for the soap opera. Baym’s work differs somewhat from Turkle’s in that she occasionally does visit some of her participants in the physical world – she herself is a participant in the fan group for the daytime soap opera, All My Children, and so she physically knows the members of the Champaign group at least, and occasionally gets together with them as a group off-line as well as on-line. This gives her some perspective on their lives outside of the computer group, although she makes little use of this to comment on or contextualize her analysis of the online texts generated by the group.
Life in front of the screen

A further newly rapidly established tradition of research on how people are appropriating the internet within their everyday lives – at home, in the family, at work, school and elsewhere – is taking a mainly but not exclusively qualitative, contextualized approach (e.g. Facer et al, 2001, Ribak, 2001; Livingstone 2003b). The focus has been on locating this new object of consumption within domestic practices of space, time and social relations to understand how it is becoming integrated within an already-complex media environment.

These studies suggest that, for many people, the internet is still a fragile medium, experienced as unfamiliar, confusing, easier to get wrong than right, far from taken for granted. In the home, for example, we begin to see how parents are developing strategies to manage and regulate the internet within the home, strongly framed by educational aspirations for their children even though children themselves value online entertainment centered on fandom, transferring established interests from older media contents – music, stars, sports, television programs. The resultant struggle between parental strategies and children’s tactics suggests a ‘digital generation gap’ in which children and teens play a key role in acquiring and understanding the internet, and this includes explaining it to their parents, although their expertise and influence should not be overestimated.

Research on the social contexts of internet appropriation and use is beginning to move beyond the descriptive, identifying ways in which the home is changing, becoming the site of content production as well as reception, of education and work as well as entertainment and leisure (Livingstone, 2003b). This raises new questions about the links between different activities, as learning becomes fun, as work blurs into leisure, as online chat may ‘count’ as civic participation, and so forth. Such interlinked and mediated activities serve also to sustain particular, perhaps new, links between people also, this having implications for social codes and regulation, for emergent community or peer cultures, and for changing boundaries and occasions for social exclusion.

At present, however, we have more questions than answers, partly because although it is assiduous in contextualizing internet use, much of this research has yet to engage thoroughly
with the internet *qua* medium (or, more correctly, a diverse bundle of information and communication technologies, each with distinct possibilities for content): often it fails satisfactorily even to discriminate between the computer and the internet, treating the computer *qua* object in the living room or bedroom as more significant than it does people’s engagement with specifically online contents, services and activities.

**From “virtual ethnography’ to “internet ethnography”: Toward the second generation studies**

How is research to go beyond “virtual ethnography” to “internet ethnography”, to contextualise interpretation of online texts (reception of what’s on the screen) in relation to consumption of a technological good in the domestic setting (in front of the screen)? Methodologically, and as illustrated by some of the empirical projects in this volume, Fornas et al (2002) advocate supplementing participation in online interaction (‘cyberethnography’) with face-to-face and other offline methods, ‘in order to contextualize their online texts and thereby understand them even better than other participants do’ (p.38). One project which does exactly that is Miller and Slater’s (2000) study of internet use as one aspect of an ethnographically-based study of life in Trinidad. They conclude that computer and internet use reinforce social meanings and practices already inherent in the offline world. Rather than undermining national identity, for example, and encouraging a more global identification, the internet is used by Trinidadians to strengthen their national identity, for it gives them additional communicative venues they can use to develop national networks and groups.

Using much simpler methods, but following the same principle of integrating the online with the offline, Sveningsson (2002) inquired into the formation of those romantic or friendship relations in online chatrooms that are then continued offline (to varying degrees, from a phone call to a permanent relationship). Methodologically, hers was a traditional qualitative study, based on in-depth face to face interviews, and addressing the internet as a topic of research, not a medium for research. As the focus was on the medium as a locus for social interaction rather than on direct engagement with the medium as text or technology, the project pursued questions of identity and sociality rather than of audiencehood, except insofar as participants in online chat are involved in a process of interpretation or textual encoding and decoding.
In her interviews, Sveningsson listens out particularly for their accounts of why an online meeting differs from an offline one, and for the ways in which the relationships develop both before and after they move to meeting offline; this latter requires an offline rather than online research method. Typically, there was a shift from a textual relationship (seeing the other not as a person but through an engagement with synchronous typed text) in which some aspects of identity could be playfully managed (through nicknames, accounts of appearance, etc) while others were inadvertently disclosed, or ‘given off’, just as in offline meetings. Crucially, the possibility for playful management of identity was used to increase, rather than decrease, self-disclosure, enabling a careful revealing of the self in ways not easy to manage offline, resulting in an enhancement rather than lessening of trust in relationships formed online. The offline world, by implication, was widely seen as risky, inhibiting trust, opening one up to embarrassment and loss of face, while a mediated context obviates such risks, liberating through distance. The shift to an offline relationship is thus a tense and tricky one, though Sveningsson argues that until it occurs, participants may become close (‘as soul mates’, even) but they do not fall in love, the face-to-face therefore indelibly changing the nature of the relationship. As she shows, there is less likely to be a simple shift from online to offline, but rather a carefully staged sequence, mediated through the move from chat to email, then telephone, and then the face-to-face meeting. Interestingly, she found that following the offline meeting, the participants no longer sustain the online chat, though the phone remains part of the relationship, the need for a carefully managed distance no longer being required. In conclusion, Sveningsson suggests that the process of forming relationships is altered when mediated by the internet – in terms of chronology, pace, control, conditions of trust, and so forth – but that the relationships themselves do not differ from those formed in offline settings.

**Theorizing internet use: All change?**

We have seen that the second generation ethnographic research projects are attempting to integrate offline and online analyses of internet use. Hence they combine an enquiry regarding users’ engagement with what’s on the screen (studies extending the text-reader metaphor, or exploring theories of identity and selfhood in relation to particular online forms and genre) with an account of the context of use in front of the screen (exploring the motives for gaining internet
access, the social contexts of use in terms of timetabling of use, location of the computer, etc and the emerging domestic practices of use in terms of gender, class and generation). These are laudable aims, albeit they demand time-consuming projects often using multiple methods. However, we suggest that the legacy of the contrasting versions of the first generation projects, as discussed above, persists, generating some contrasting rather than complementary conclusions.

Particularly, it seems that those conducting purely online ethnographic research are more liable to draw conclusions regarding the transformative nature of the internet than are those conducting primarily offline ethnographies on the contexts of internet use. In other words, as was the case for television, it seems that those following in the reception tradition are more likely than those following in the consumption tradition to find evidence hinting at shifts from unified to fragmented identity, from normative to creative meanings, from hierarchical to anarchic sociality – in short, from the modernist world view of mass broadcasting to a postmodern engagement with today’s complex and shifting media environment. In so doing, online studies tend to underplay or underestimate the importance of the social context in front of the screen, where this works – in Fornas et al’s terms – to delimit the transformations promised by the new medium through the conservative and stabilizing consequences of everyday material routines and structures.

On the other hand, those who start with life in front of the screen tend to produce findings which argue against the autonomy of cyberspace and instead insist on the anchoring of life on the screen in the social contexts of use in front of the screen. As is consistent with the sociology of consumption, the findings tend to reveal processes of appropriation rather than change, revealing the incorporation of the new within well-established frameworks and routines of the familiar, the everyday. Offline social norms are transferred online, it is argued, and the online changes little or nothing in the offline world. Hence, this approach tends towards a more conservative view, revealing little that is ‘bravely new’ about the new media and supporting an account of the continuation of (late) modernity rather than the radical shift to postmodernity.

One could conclude from this contrast that methods determine findings. But of course, there are always exceptions to undermine so straightforward a mapping of methods and findings. For example, from her purely online ethnography of a text-based virtual world, Sunden (2002: 107)
draws a conservative conclusion about the re-imposition of traditionally gendered practices in this potentially open space: “instead of using the Net as a place for liberating transgressions and textual deconstructions of the physical body, most WaterMOOers tend to use the text to put the gendered body back into the picture, inevitably dragging a whole battery of cultural meanings with them”. So, rather than assert a simple mapping of findings onto the methods that generated them, instead we conclude by flagging, and problematizing, the relationship yet to be unpacked between theory, research findings, and choice of research method in the field of internet use and its consequences.

For the theory at stake is crucial to this emerging story. In the days of mass broadcasting, television was most often theorized as a homogenizing and monolithic force. As Gerbner and Gross (1976) said, television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time and, as those following in the tradition of the Frankfurt school argued, for the most part, it’s the same story, posing audiences merely with ‘the freedom to choose what is always the same’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1977). The same may be said, in this broad brush review, of theories of powerful media and of ideological or social reinforcement and reproduction (e.g. theories of hegemony, of cultivation, of dominant media, of cultural imperialism, etc). Since these all positioned the audience as passive, vulnerable and homogenous, reception research was used to challenge well-established theory. Indeed, in this context, reception studies were surely bound to seem radical, for studies of interpretation in practice can generally be relied upon to throw up findings of diversity, nuance and context-dependency which contradict the assertion of a dominant medium, particularly one whose power is encoded into and effective through the workings of a supposedly fixed and unitary (or deterministic) text.

On the other hand, media consumption research has tended instead to illustrate social and economic continuities (as in accounts of when old technologies were new or those stressing the appropriation of potentially new media according to familiar domestic structures; Flichy 1995, Marvin 1988). Doubtless this is partly because studies of media use draw on a larger social and economic context than that of local interpretation, rendering them much more sensitive to the deterministic power of the social context, even though they may underestimate that of the text. This bias is supported by their strong concern to avoid anything that smacks of technological determinism (consumption studies being more focused on media qua technologies than on media qua texts). Hence they do better than reception-oriented studies at recognizing the importance of
embedded social inequalities, long-established practices and other structural factors. However, as a result they tend neither to support theories of media power (and passive audiences) nor of creative interpretation (and active audiences), but rather instead they assert a social determinism (where class and gender inequalities are reproduced and reasserted through media use, just as through education, the family, etc). And in consequence, they struggle to acknowledge the agency or individuality of media audiences.

Intriguingly, it has once again become fashionable to argue that the media exert a strong influence over those who use them. Specifically, the internet is being strongly theorized by many once again as a dominant force, although crucially, this time, it is proposed as a force for change, taking society from modernity to postmodernity. As a result, the theory itself foregrounds diversity, alternative and open possibilities, transformation and radical breaks (Poster 2000, Castells 2002, Turkle 1995) rather than, as was proposed for television, foregrounding the media as a force of conservativism, reproducing traditional dominant ideology and inequalities (although some are beginning to theorize the internet as a force to reproduce dominant ideologies in the interests of the established capitalist elites also; Barney 2000).

The challenge today is therefore to balance textual determinism, social determinism, and the agency of the audience or user. Whether these factors in combination result in a reproduction of the status quo or an opportunity for change depends, clearly, on the theory against which these micro-practices of everyday life are measured. If grand shifts are postulated, audiences will seem more conservative than if a ‘no change’ thesis is favored. In the heyday of television audience research, reception studies suggested diversity and creativity in the face of materialist, Marxist theories that posited no change, while audience consumption research suggested continuity and conservativism in the face of what were often technologically determinist theories positing radical change. Are we now repeating such a bifurcation in internet studies?

**Looking ahead**

Methodologically, what is interesting in all this is the repositioning of ethnographic and qualitative audience study. Whereas once this work was seen as theoretically radical, challenging an orthodoxy which undervalued the role of the audience in interacting with new technologies
and as having some input into the influence these technologies might exert, now empirical
audience study, even that of the interpretive, critical kind, functions either in support of, or as a
conservative check on the claims that postmodern theorists make about the transformative impact
of new media on contemporary life. Indeed, we find in our own work that there is a consistent
tension between our attempts to, on the one hand, apply the critical frameworks explaining
inequality and difference to explaining the lives of those we study, and on the other our
ethnographic commitment to observe their agency, to learn from them some of the complexities
of how inequality plays out in the day-to-day realities of concrete lives and consciousnesses.

When presenting research, for example, that explains some of the structural inequalities some of
our informants face, we are sometimes criticized for stating these inequalities as the objective
reality of their condition, rather than focusing on the power of their agency as they exercise it
from their particular positions. When we focus on agency, some criticize us for not mentioning
structural constraints. There is a continuing tension in our accounts between these two poles.

These are, of course, long-standing challenges in ethnographic social research. For as often
argued, culture operates in a complex way in modern societies, sometimes carrying the weight of
structural constraint, at other times working for those who seek to thwart the constraints of their
position. Ortner (forthcoming; pp.xx) describes this quandary in a forthcoming work she has
completed analyzing the class mobility of her high school graduating class in Weequahic, New
Jersey:

I had originally planned to break up the Class by class, and compare how the “high
capital” kids and the “low capital” kids did, in order to see the degree of class “drag” on
their later lives, and also the different structures of discourse and feeling in which their
different experiences were framed and embedded. For reasons which I explained earlier,
however, the discussion turned out to be virtually unwritable in that form, since people do
not for the most part live class in America as socially naked actors, but via other, more
salient, identities. Moreover, to look at both class drag and class mobility abstracted from
these other identities is to get locked in a kind of simplistic structure-agency binary -
either people’s life chances were held back (or facilitated) by the effects of class, or
people by their own individual efforts (or failures thereof) managed to pull themselves up
or drop down. This binary is real enough, and I have of course used it throughout this
book, but used “nakedly” it ignores not only the identities through which people function
as class subjects, but the histories of those identities. The last several decades of so-called
identity politics have forced us to recognize the ways in which “agency” itself is
constrained by collective forms of oppression, and facilitated by collective forms of
liberation.

Ortner worries about the ways in which frameworks which stress the structured nature of
inequality inevitably lack a certain explanatory power, being characterized by chasms that can be
filled only by close observation of the ordinary and everyday, and close connection to the agency
which breaks through these structures, if not effectively and constantly, at times and
significantly. She also offers a way forward which we are now following – a strategy in which
inequality remains the major metanarrative but the empirical work shows how complex
inequality is in practice, so that in researching young people and the internet one needs an
account of use-in-context as well as of the facts of diffusion and access and so, as a result,
political economy needs ethnography of the everyday. To accommodate these complexities, we
and others are turning to draw in other concepts such as capacity, agency, capital, competence
etc. Classes – and cultures, including postmodern culture – do not exist except insofar as they are
understood and enacted by the people who live them. With this cornerstone, we proceed to detail
the daily lives, thoughts and actions of the new world of internet users, to straddle objectivist and
subjectivist frameworks in the interests of doing justice both to the agency of those who use new
media, and the cultural, economic, and social constraints which affect them.
References


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