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1. The characteristics of mass media audience in the current context

The concept of the public and the audience originated in the 14th century when forms of live communication, such as speeches, operas, musicals and other forms of performance, began to emerge, and participants in those forms of live communication were considered "audience." However, it was too vague to deem this "audience" group as "mass audience, as they were limited to small groups. In the mid-19th century, with the emergence and development of mass media, such as print newspaper, radio, television, the concept of audience was commonly used for those exposing to these types of indirect media, and the "mass" nature became evident: the audience group was large, diverse and they consumed content indirectly through mass media. In the second half of the 20th century, with the rapid development of mass media, audience research became more popular and was used for a variety of purposes: research for audience development, market expansion, academic and scientific purposes.(1) By the 21st century, groundbreaking changes in media technology have directly influenced the previous conception and shaping of the mass media audience. They are no longer mere groups of loyal audience willing to wait for the news broadcast or issues of newspaper coming out to catch up with current events. They have become more proactive and diverse in their access to media. The proactive and active interaction of the media audience has enormously changed the approach to media research and audience research.

The author generalized some of the differences or change trends in the changes of the audience in the present climate as follows:

The audience: Moving from a "passive" audience generation to a "proactive" audience generation.

With the widespread use of the Internet, social networks, smart devices, audiences no longer "passively" receive information, but actively participate in the communication process and content and message creation. The initiative was reflected in sending letters, messages, feedback to newsrooms and programs mass media and selecting content, ways of approach and the timing to access information according to their needs and preferences. This issue began to be discussed by some researchers in the late 20th century. Blumler and Katz (1974) addressed the change and the ability to actively select information, content, tools, and means of access to information by the audience in their "Use and Gratifications" theory. The initiative showed not only in the selection of information: What content? Which media and channel? When and where to approach?, but also in the opportunity to candidly debate, discuss the approached content, and even participate in "producing" or creating media content, in harmony with the rich and diverse flow of information in the society. Today, every "audience" involved in that flow of information can act as the "communicator" of the communication process. The boundaries between the role of "sender" and "recipient" is blurring; the new generation of the audience no longer frames themselves as the "recipient" of the communication message. The audience gradually shifts to being the "subjects" in the media processes.

The audience: Moving from the simple audience generation to audience generation that is diverse in their structure and media behavior

The audience of the new media becomes more sophisticated and mixed with some of the following specific manifestations:

- +) They do not simply listen to, watch, read newspapers, radios, televisions but access multiple media and various information simultaneously.
- +) They can use smart devices to obtain news pieces from the mass media instead of owning a radio or television, or subscribing to a newspaper.
- +) They listen to/read/watch the news while texting or commenting to discuss and share their opinions, participating in online forums, looking up further information or

verifying information from different sources, even interacting to create more diverse and rich messages. Mass media no longer holds a monopoly on information or the conveyance of information to the audience, as the audience has become more media literate and does not entirely depend on the information delivered by the mass media if it is inappropriate and does not meet their needs. They will gradually minimize and eventually stop getting information from specific-slot scheduled broadcasts and shift to being active on the Internet for most of the day. They will also regularly adjust their media behavior and switch between different information sources.

In addition to the diversity and complexity of access to information and to mass media, the habits of the "audience" are also constantly changing. Instead of watching TV or listening to the radio with relatives and friends at a fixed broadcasting time as in the past society, the audience now accesses information in more "personalized" ways. They use personal devices such as phones and tablets anywhere and any time to access information, or even to watch television and listen to the radio. The power of the media and the power of the "audience".

In many countries, including Vietnam mass media is considered a "powerful" institution; its power is even likened to a "magic bullet" to describe the effectiveness of the media: Mass media shape public opinion. Now in the context that the "audience" becomes more active and acts as the "subject" of the media, the power of the audience is also greatly enhanced. Details are as follows:

- +) The audience may refuse to obtain information from specific sources if they think the provided information is unreliable or unsuitable to their own needs. There are diverse sources of information and entertainment in the current context, so the audience is no longer too dependent on a specific source.

- +) The audience participates in evaluating the quality of information, sending feedback, and questioning information that they believe is inaccurate or violates journalistic ethics...

- +) The audience engages in the process of creating messages and content to join the general information flow via the devices they can access. In many cases, the audience is the one who shapes public opinion.

With the active participation of the "audience" in the communication process, some argue that the term "audience" does not fully express its characteristics in the present climate. Some authors have suggested to replacing the word "audience" with a new term "users" to emphasize the unique characteristics of the new generation of media audience. They should be treated similarly to social network users identified as "social network users" instead of the "audience". It seems that the connotation of the word "audience" can no longer carry their recently-developed characteristics. Now the "audience" has begun to be called by many other names, such as online generation, digital generation, etc.

2. Emerging issues for public research in the current context

Identifying the "audience" There is a pressing need for research and identification of the current mass media audience, to help managers and marketers accurately grasp the portrait of the current audience and potential audience of different information channels. Thereby, they can devise strategies to maintain and develop the audience of the mass media because the decline in the audience means the shrinkage of the influence and popularity of the mentioned media. However, purely identifying the audience of each traditional media and seeing them as passive information "consumers" of information has become inappropriate or inadequate in the current context.

Future studies need to focus on analyzing new trends: the audience's initiative; the changes in the role, position and power of the audience; the multi-faceted and complex media behavior; the continuous "movement" of the "audience" in different roles such as the role of "receiving", "processing", "conveying" information, "debating", and "creating" content, messages. Identifying the dual role of the "audience" is a mission of immense importance in the current context, instead of only focusing on the number of the audience listening to/viewing/reading news on mass media and the frequency of accessing the above media.

In addition to the audience's new characteristics and roles, and research techniques' issues also received attention. For example:

Regarding the research questions: Previous research questions followed the same patterns of "How does the media affect the audience's perception, attitude, and behavior?". With growing tendency toward the new audience being increasingly proactive and sophisticated, perhaps the research questions need to be reversed: "How does the audience use the media in the current context?". This is a usually overlooked issue because the audiences are not always passive in their relationship with the media. Once they are "active," they are not easily influenced or affected.

Regarding the measurement of information consumption time of different media products on different media channels: Common questions on the amount of information consumption such as: "Could you estimate the average hours per day you spend watching TV?" may no longer be relevant in the present context, or may not be appropriate for many audience groups. With the audience's constant access to the Internet and their continuous effort to look for the information they want, the above questions can easily lead to incorrect information. Furthermore, memory errors can become a significant hindrance as respondents may only have relatively accurate memory of their yesterday's behavior, not to mention their behavior of the past week or month. To overcome this problem, many television and radio stations around the world have installed supporting instruments in households to accurately measure the time and frequency of the usage of specific media.

Issues on building a framework for analyzing the impact of the media on the audience in media audience research.

Previously, with the application of the analysis model of linear communication, communication was regarded as the process of transmitting information from the senders (sources) through information channels to the receivers. More specifically: According to the above analysis framework, it can be seen that the audience relied heavily on mass media and passively consumed information provided by them. During same time, the same messages/content was continuously delivered to the same audience. When applying this model, researchers believes that the results and the impacts on the audience's perception, attitude, opinion and behavior will be the same.(2) The effects can be both positive or negative. Some of the frequently-used research questions to study the impacts of mass media on the audience according to

the linear model are as follows:

- +) What are the implications or effects of violent movies broadcast on television on children's behavior?
- +) To what extent do advertisements of fast food and unhealthy drinks affect children's consumption behavior?(3)

To conduct these above researches, researchers often employed empirical methods evaluate the relationship between the frequency and levels of movies or advertisements exposure to the audience's behavior. In the current new media context, the impact of mass media may not be direct, but instead goes through many intermediate stages with intermediate variables. Regarding the circular cycle, the audience is not always the endpoint of the impact. In other words, they are not always in the group of dependent variables, not always directly affected by mass media. The analytical framework should be revised in specific cases and research contexts. For example, when posing the following research questions: What are the effects of violent movies, TV shows, and games on students' violent behavior?, the responses can be debatable:

- +) With the diversity of information channels and sources nowadays, children are not prone to consume all information and content from television. They are media literate enough to determine what's the appropriate information.
- +) The effects of violent movies and content on children or groups of children with behavior problems are due to many reasons: Children lacking parental guidance or surrounded by bad groups of friends show a higher inclination to look for violent movies, content, and information channels with a violence tendency. Then it is no longer a matter of mass media causing aggressive attitudes and behaviors, but a case of people with behaviors and attitudes problems tending to choose to consume violent information and content to satisfy their own needs. Thus, in the current context of audience and media research, researchers should heedfully choose an analysis framework, pose hypotheses, and draw a conclusion when studying media's direct impact (without mediating factors) on audience's perception, attitude, and behavior.(4).

Some proposed solutions for audience research in the current context

Analyses in this article shows that mass media audience research needs further discussion and study. Within this article, the authors make some suggestions as follows:

- To fully understand the audience, especially studying the impacts between the media and the audience, it is necessary to carry out integrated and simultaneous studies in identifying audiences, analyzing message content, analyzing media context, analyzing audiences' capacity to interpret the content. Findings from multifaceted researches will contain have more objective evidence for testing research hypotheses than stand-alone studies. Suppose the studies only cover one part of the media process. In that case it will merely provide a comprehensive understanding of the matter as both the media and the audiences become more sophisticated and multifaceted in terms of behavior.

- It is advisable to combine quantitative and qualitative analysis in audience research because the results provide a more comprehensive perception of the audiences and the media context. The quantitative research approach will contribute to a more detailed portrait of the audience on different media and the relationship between content, media messages, and the audiences. Meanwhile, the qualitative research approach will help gain complementary insights into the media context, media literacy, and the audiences' capacity to interpret the message or media content. In audience analysis, whether it is audience identification or analysis of the interrelationships between media content and the audiences, researchers also need to put the audiences in specific media contexts to interpret and analyze the interrelationships between the media and the audiences through qualitative analysis methods.

- The relationship between media, content, and audiences can be considered as a two-way interaction. Therefore, the analysis framework of analysis on the relationship between the media and the audiences and identifying and building a system of groups of variables needs to be considered under each specific study. It will help to avoid the prejudice that the audiences are passive receivers in the media process and are directly ruled by information from mass media, and ignoring the media literacy of the subjects: Their active capacity in choosing to consume or refuse content, information

channels, and create content in an highly complex and diverse communication network.

In short, the article focused on discussing the new characteristics of the audiences of mass media amid the current explosion of media, especially the widespread of the Internet, smartphones, and the power of social networks. With such significant quantities of new characteristics, audience research also poses new questions about the analysis framework, research techniques, and research approaches. These are very new issues that need to be covered in further theoretical and practical researches and discussions.

Tài liệu tham khảo

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