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A Comparative Analysis of Media Consumption and Cultural Participation in the US and Germany Today (work-in-progress)

A Brief Critique of Audience Research

What and who audience are may seem fairly straightforward, at least as far as the current situation of audience research is concerned. Certainly, the large amounts of money spent on commercial research into audiences' media usage and behavior seem to suggest that media producers believe they know what audiences are and how to measure their responses to their products. We hear, every year, about this or that pilot project of a new television series that is then discontinued based on the results of audience measurements. However, when we look back over the history of the conceptualizations of audiences and research into them, it soon becomes evident that "audience" has always been a rather fluid and poorly defined concept. In the popular imagination, media corporations and advertising agencies conduct intensive research into audiences. They identify the audience members' socio-economic class, lifestyles, motivation, disposable income, perceived fantasies, etc., and that knowledge enables them to "target" their audience precisely. In fact, however, "the advertising industry is undoubtedly successful at persuading manufacturers and distributors to buy its services: its success in persuading consumers to buy particular products is much more open to question -- between 80 and 90 per cent of new products fail despite extensive advertising. To take another example, many films fail to recover even their promotional costs at the box office" (Fiske 1989) and "because it's a mass audience -- it's an unimaginably large audience -- the audience tastes are so diffused and so general that you've got to be guessing. You can work off precedents about what's worked on TV before. You can work off whatever smattering of sociological information you gleaned from whatever sources. You can let your personal judgments enter into it to some extent ... But you never really know" (Scott Siegler, former CBS vice-president for drama development, qtd. in Ang 1990).

We have access to large amounts of statistical data about audiences, but the audience members remain "statistics with skins" (Tracey 1988, qtd. in Jeffrey 1996). "Watching television" is not necessarily the same activity for you as it is for me. In fact, my "watching television" is probably not the same for me today as it was yesterday. Our use of the media is closely tied up with the rest of our daily lives and will be conditioned by what we want to get out of it, who we are with, who we discuss the matter at hand with, where we happen to be, and so on. The statistics tell us very little about that. In fact, as Ang argues, "in a multitude of ways, sometimes routine, sometimes exceptional, television plays an intimate role in shaping our day-to-day practices and experiences ... However, our understanding of what all these practices and experiences mean, what they imply and implicate, has remained scant. ... Given television's conspicuousness in contemporary culture and society, this poverty of discourse, this lack of understanding is rather embarrassing indeed, if not downright scandalous" (1990). With new methods of accessing TV (satellite, cable, video rental, "time-shifting" using the VCR, and so on),

audience research is not simply a problem for academic researchers but an important issue for media professionals who need to be able to persuade advertisers that they are getting value for money" (Underwood 2002).

In brief, most of current research raises new questions to what extent and how a special set of various patterns actually may determine the process of participating with media, of understanding media discourse, and what items may strengthen the social process of building a consensus in the group or a decision by an individual about a media product. Here, the object of researchers is locate causalities between personal attitudes, social behavior, demographics (age, gender, profession, income, etc.), and the ways of media use, respectively. The paradigm here is backed by a worldview in which variables stemming from a social, economical, and psychological discourses go first and variables - - such as the ways of media use in the context of cultural participation -- come second. Usually, in most audience research the question does not arise as to what extent the use of media itself constitutes shared views of relevant features or to a certain amount overlapping perspectives into the world we live in, thus performing a kind of communicative coherence in certain groups.

Recently, therefore, a discussion has begun in media theory to question the problem the other way around. Some theorists find it more interesting to focus research by describing groups on behalf of a common media use. Audience research, then, means first to collect data about media users and their everyday use of media and, second, to constitute by empirical and statistical methods groups of those who use the media in a comparable way for comparable reasons and with a comparable effect. Theorists legitimize this approach, for example Siegfried J. Schmidt, by arguing that the world we live in, that the way we want to see the world and the way we see it, is at first -- and in a fundamental way -- a matter and result of communication. In this type of audience research it is argued that since modern societies and the people in those societies communicate by use of media they do so the more that society grows in complexity and diversity, and -- vice versa -- the more the modern society develops and diversifies, the more it becomes important to use media for communication for any individual or group agent(s).

Relying on those assumptions it seems a serious undertaking to investigate the use of media in a certain group of users. In conducting such a research project the collected data should then be questioned and interpreted by using appropriate statistical methods, to describe groups of users with comparable aims and objectives, and comparable media behavior – so as to not reducing them to groups categorized only by income or professional position or by gender or similar traditional ways common in most audience research. Instead, we propose to look into whether or not the often-claimed divergence and differences between media users in the US cultural system as compared with media users in the German cultural system shows different (or shared) practices and processes in the use of media as cultural participation.

Key Definitions

The theoretical and methodological background of our project into media use is defined by the notion of cultural participation as the previously referred to papers "Toward a Framework of Audience Studies," available online at <http://clwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/library/audiencestudies.html> and "From Comparative Literature Today toward Comparative Cultural Studies" at <http://clwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clweb99-3/totosy99.html>.

In order to facilitate at a basic understanding of concepts and notions upon which our project is based, here we present some key definitions, as follows.

1) In comparative cultural studies it is the processes of communicative action(s) in culture and the "how" of these processes in certain groups which constitute the main objectives of research and study. However, comparative cultural studies does not exclude textual analysis proper or other established fields of study. In comparative cultural studies the framework of and methodologies available in the systemic and empirical study of literature/culture are favored.

2) By cultural participation we mean an umbrella term to denote the activities of individuals and groups in their interaction(s) with cultural products and processes such as the reading of written texts, the use of media offerings such as radio, television, the listening to music, the use of the world wide web, etc., that is, interaction in some way with the sources, processes, and results of media culture in its widest definition.

3) To explain audience and audience studies as we see it in the realm of media studies we propose that audience is defined as an individual's or a group of persons' cerebral and/or sensory and/or tactile intake/reception and/or perception of a culture product and/or products of communicative action(s) in all media.

4) Media culture is defined as a system of communicative action(s) with several sub-systems of such communicative actions including all types of communication in all media.

5) Media is defined as the tools and venues of communication via which a culture product or products is/are assembled, processed, disseminated, and consumed (e.g., printed matter, television, film, radio, theater, etc.).

6) The field of scholarship including market-oriented research where audience is studied is commonly designated as Audience Studies, aimed at the observation and analysis of individuals in groups and their behavior with regard to his/her or their intake of a particular culture product(s) presented in a medium or media. In this definition, areas of communicative action such as the readership of literature, radio audience, television viewer-ship, music concert audience, theater audience/spectatorship, museum viewing, multimedia, the world wide web, etc., are all understood as constituting audience of communicative action(s) with/in/of media.

7) We understand audience studies inquiry into the what, when, where, who, why, and how of a media culture product or products consumed by certain groups of media users.

8) We propose to categorize the following areas of audience research: *Readers as Audience*: Printed media (book, newspaper, magazine, etc.); *Auditory Audience*: Radio, record, tape, CD, incl. music and other forms of material, etc.; *Auditory and Visual Audience of Performance*: Theater, musical, opera, concert, dance, etc. *Audience*

Development Studies (opera: a combination of comprehensive strategies towards and including studies of relationships between audience, the art form, and the opera company); *Visual Audience*: Museum, gallery, exhibition, photography, display, etc.; *Mixed Auditory and Visual Audience of Media* (e.g., television, film, video, music video, etc.); *New Media and Technology Audience*: World wide web, multimedia, etc.; *Mass Media Audience*: Audiences of mass media where audience is understood primarily in a quantitative context and tied to newer media such as television, film, music on CD and television, etc. At the same time, also newspaper and magazine audience, book readership, etc., can be understood as audience of mass media.

Data Collection, Data Input, and Data Analysis

We are now in the process of inputting data into statistical programming and once done, we begin with the statistical (quantitative) analysis of the data. Concurrently, data such as books read, films viewed, music listened to, etc., listed by the survey subjects is also being analyzed. The survey data were collected via questionnaires about the weekly media habits with data written up by the participants daily including a six-month data questionnaire. The questionnaires are available online at

<<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/library/medialog.html>> (English) and at
<<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/library/medialog02.html>> (German).

The data of the first questionnaire consists of the media intake by about 120 students of Communication and Media Studies at Northeastern University (Boston, USA) in 2001 and the data of the second questionnaire consists of data by about 140 Media and Communication Studies students at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg students (Halle, Germany) in 2002 from which data from 25 participants from the US and 25 from Germany are selected randomly. Among other data, the surveys include questions about the intake of TV, music (radio, CD, MTV, concert, etc.), newspaper, magazine, and book reading, e-mail and web use including web surfing, and similar categories of cultural participation with mass media.. The age of the participants in the surveys range in both instances 20-26. In both cases the questionnaires were placed online and the data from the participants were sent to Totosy via e-mail. Both at Northeastern and at Halle-Wittenberg the data of the questionnaires were a required part of the students' work for the successful completion of the seminars instructed by Steven Totosy.

The overall theoretical and methodological background of the study is based on concepts developed for the field of comparative cultural studies (see Steven Totosy, "From Comparative Literature Today toward Comparative Cultural Studies." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal* 1.3 (1999):

<<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb99-3/totosy99.html>>; for research in audience studies, see Totosy at
<<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/library/audiencestudies.html>>; for material about terminology and secondary literature see also Totosy at
<<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/library/research&coursematerial1.html>>).

The members of the research team are as follows. Steven Totosy (Boston and U of Halle-Wittenberg), Reinhold Viehoff (U of Halle-Wittenberg), Clemens Seyfried (College of Pedagogy, Linz), and Konstanze Wunneburg (U of Halle-Wittenberg). Selected data from the Halle survey will also be analyzed by Cordula Günther (U of Halle-Wittenberg). It is planned to submit for publication a number of studies resulting from the analyses of the raw data, in both English and German journals.

The survey questionnaires at Northeastern and at Halle-Wittenberg were posted online and participants sent in their data weekly per e-mail. While this method proved cost effective at the same time it created the problem of data transfer because the data would need to be input manually from the e-mails into a software program. Also, the data accumulated are very large in size including the items listed. Owing to the fact that the project (including the surveys, their processing, and their analysis) is without research funding, the input of the data into a statistical software program would be highly time consuming as well as unaffordable. A member of the research team, Konstanze Wunneburg (Halle-Wittenberg), input the data of twenty-five participants from the Northeastern survey and the data of twenty-five participants from the Halle-Wittenberg survey, in both instances by random selection. For the statistical analysis of media intake as per time lengths, the data have been consolidated into the following categories of type of media use and subcategories of use of media genres.

TV total time intake: entertainment (incl. soaps, reality soaps, documentary, soaps, cartoons, sitcoms etc.), sports, music channels (e.g., MTV, music shows).

Radio total time intake: total of all radio-subcategories listed by subjects, general programming of various stations.

Music: (CD, TV, Radio, Video, etc.) total time intake (incl. gospel, jazz, and classical music, rock and popular music (incl. punk, heavy metal, etc.).

Print Media total time intake: newspaper, book, magazine, study material.

World Wide Web total time intake: e-mail (incl. instant messenger), web surfing (incl. napster and similar).

Other Media total time intake: outside advertising, theater, opera, concert, clubbing.

Demographics: gender, household income, education of parent(s), type of residence, e.g., city or town.

Sample Data

In order to demonstrate the type and amount of data we accumulated and will analyze, we present here a few examples, as follows.

Example 1

Here is an example of the weekly data by a Northeastern participant in the survey:

MONDAY:

Simpsons/ 7:00pm-7:30pm/ Channel 25/ FOX/LB

Total Request Live/ 4:00pm-5:00pm/ Channel 40/ MTV/LB

Howard Stern/ 11:00pm-12:00am/ Channel 42/ E! Entertainment Television/ LB
 Friends/ 8:00pm-8:30pm/ Channel 7/ NBC/ LB
 Northeastern News/ 6:00pm-6:30pm/ LB
 Beatles Anthology/ 10:00pm-10:30pm/ HB
 Stone Temple Pilots - No. 4/ 8:00am-8:30am/ LB
 REM - Up/ 8:30am-9:00am/ LB
 Beatles - Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band/ 9:00am-9:30am/ HB
 Red Hot Chili Peppers - BSSM/ 9:30am-10:00am/ LB
TUESDAY:
 Howard Stern/ 11:00pm-12:00am/ Channel 42/ E! Entertainment Television/ LB
 Wild on E!/ 12:00am-1:00am/ Channel 42/ E! Entertainment Television/ LB
 Boston Globe/ 1:00pm-1:30pm/ HB
 Beatles Anthology/ 1:00am-1:30am/ HB
 Counting Crows - LIVE/ 6:00pm-7:30pm/ LB
 Napster - Various Artists/ 7:30-9:00/ HB
 AOL Instant Messenger/ 9:00pm-10:00pm/ HB
WEDNESDAY:
 Simpsons/ 7:00pm-7:30pm/ Channel 25/ FOX/ LB
 Howard Stern/ 11:00pm-11:30pm/ Channel 42/ E! Entertainment Television/ LB
 Napster & #8211; Various Artists/ 12:00pm-2:00pm/ 6:00pm-8:00pm/ HB
THURSDAY:
 Price is Right/ 12:00pm-1:00pm/ABC/ LB
 Total Request Live/ 4:00pm-5:00pm/ Channel 40/ MTV/=20 LB
 Real World/ 10:00pm-10:30pm/ Channel 40/ MTV/ LB
 Howard Stern/ 11:00pm-12:00am/ Channel 42/ E! Entertainment Television/ LB
 Wild on E!/ 12:00am-1:00am/ Channel 42/ E! Entertainment Television/ LB
 Talk Soup/ 1:00am-1:30am/ Channel 42/ E! Entertainment Television/ LB
 Boston Globe/ 8:00am-8:30am/ HB
 Napster- Various Artists/ 11:00am-1:00pm/ HB
 AOL Instant Messenger/ 3:00pm-4:00pm/ HB
FRIDAY:
 Total Request Live/ 4:00pm-5:00pm/ Channel 40/ MTV/ LB
 Presidential Debate/ 5:00pm-6:00pm/ Channel 37/ CSPAN/ HB
 Beatles Anthology/ 1:30pm-2:00pm/ HB
 Bob Marley - Greatest Hits/ 2:00pm-3:00pm/ HB
 Napster - Various Artists/ 3:00pm-4:00pm/ HB

Example 2

Here is an example of the six-months data by a Northeastern participant in the survey:

Films: The Shining Stanley Kubrick Warner Brothers/ The Replacements,
 Howard Deutsch Warner Brothers/ Cast Away Robert Zemeckis Dreamworks/ Me
 Myself and Irene Bobby and Peter Farrelly 20th Century Fox/ Highlander End Game
 Douglas Aarniokoski Miramax, Books-Instant Replay Instant Holtzman Press Inc
 Copyright 1968 Edited by Dick Shapp

Videos: Batman 1 Tim Burton Copyright 1989 Warner Bros, Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves Director Kevin Reynolds 1997 Warner Bros, Gladiator Ridley Scott Copyright 2000 Universal Pictures, Rocky John Avildson, Rocky IV Sylvester Stallone MGM, Rocky II Sylvester Stallone MGM United Artist, Rocky III Sylvester Stallone MGM United Artist, Mission Impossible 1-2 Brian De Palma Paramount. The Running Man Paul Glaser Home Box Office Tri Star, Star Wars Episodes (1)4-5-6 George Lucas 20th Century Fox Lucas Films Ltd, DVD- Gladiator Ridley Scott Copyright 2000 Universal Pictures, The Matrix The Wachowski Brothers, Warner Bros, Robin Hood Prince of Thieves Director Kevin Reynolds 1997 Morgan Creek

Music: Ten Pearl Jam Epic, Vs. Pearl Jam Epic, Vitality Pearl Jam Epic, Best of Sade Sade Epic, Metallica Ride the Lightning Elektra, Metallica Master of Puppets Elektra, Metallica And Justice for All, Elektra, Metallica Load and Reload, Elektra, Best of Van Halen, Van Halen Warner, Clumsy Our Lady Peace Sony, Sixteen Bush Interscope, Throwing Copper Live RadioActive, MCMXC A.D. Enigma Charisma,

Items of media intake other than English: None

List your most favored types of media: TV, Film, Music, Newspaper, in their respective positions as shown in my list of media intake above

Reflections in general: To not be able to watch TV or to listen to radio would most likely hurt me the most due to the impact both mediums have played in my life and my career in the future will evolve around those categories. I find watching Television to be the most enjoyable of my mediums because it enables me to acquire the best of both worlds, entertainment and knowledge about the happenings around the sports scene and the rest of the world issues. I find the Newspaper and the Radio to be the most important in regards to audience due to that both mediums are the most accessible to the American public for information. I would try to fill in most of my time with Television because of the up to date information that most of the major networks bring in regards to the level and quality of information. Most media experiences that I find to be either useful or practical are Television with its movies and news, and Television again in the sense of being practical. No, in my mind I do not feel that there is an overlap, maybe in other people that use multiple channels of media and find them both useful and practical. If any comparison I would put radio as a means of being useful on a daily basis. As I entered High School I began to quickly find out with the uprising of cable TV how vital and important Television can be used for practical and useful purposes and not all the time perceived as something negative when abused in society. Looking at specific media intakes I usually focus my attentions on the sports media and use stations like ESPN, CNN and local channels for up to date information on the happenings in sports. In the newspaper I buy the USA today and read the sports section and the money section to keep up with the world's economy. Most of the time just like every average American I will unless it catches my attention pay no attention to advertisements that for the most part are a waste of my time to watch all the time. On the Web I cannot stand those advertisements coming up all over the place and I close them all the time. Television and the Web serve as an informal way of acquiring information on a day to day basis. Reading and watching movies are for my entertainment needs and also reading falls into being informative. I gave up the concert medium about 3 years ago because I felt that my entertainment needs were already at their optimum levels and I have TV and music to supplement for expensive concerts that did take up a lot of my time. For that reason I

switched to a more focus oriented effort on music as a source of media to for fill my needs.

Concluding Remarks

We assume that both the quantitative and the qualitative analyses of the data will yield some interesting results. As to the quantitative results, we assume that there will be no surprises because there is enough research available on the quantitative use of various media types. At the same time, some in-depth analysis may reveal the reasons for the differences (at this point assumed) of lengths of TV use, for instance, between the US and the German subjects. More interesting will be, or so it appears at this point, when we come to qualitative analyses. The mass of data of what precisely the participants are intaking and via which media will yield, together with the six-months responses material much about the ways of cultural participation in the US and Germany today, at least as far as the selected target group, the two categories of student population are concerned.