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12-1-2008

THE RATIONALIZATION OF AUDIENCE UNDERSTANDING

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Recommended Citation
Napoli, Philip M., "THE RATIONALIZATION OF AUDIENCE UNDERSTANDING" (2008). *McGannon Center Working Paper Series*. Paper 25.
http://fordham.bepress.com/mcgannon_working_papers/25

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DONALD MCGANNON
COMMUNICATION RESEARCH CENTER

WORKING PAPER

THE RATIONALIZATION OF AUDIENCE UNDERSTANDING

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December, 2008

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The Rationalization of Audience Understanding:
The Conceptualization and Measurement of the Institutionalized Media Audience

Abstract

This paper reviews the literature that has examined how media organizations make sense of their audiences, the analytical techniques and technologies employed, and how this information is embraced or resisted in the operation of media organizations. As this review illustrates, the historical trend in audience understanding has been one of a steady process of rationalization in how media organizations have approached their audiences. In documenting this process of the rationalization of audience understanding, this review identifies key historical moments in this process. This review identifies the external forces that have influenced this process; the underlying reasons for it; and critiques of its effects on the production, distribution, and exhibition of media content.

The Rationalization of Audience Understanding:

The Conceptualization and Measurement of the Institutionalized Media Audience

Introduction

One of the great challenges that media organizations face is effectively understanding and responding to their audience. This task is complicated by the inherently elusive, intangible, and unpredictable nature of media audiences. Consequently, media organizations have historically devoted substantial financial and analytical resources to trying to understand their audiences. The specific analytical techniques and technologies employed have changed over time, as have the perceptions of the audience that have emerged from these different analytical approaches. It is out of these efforts that media organizations' conceptualizations of their audience are formed. These conceptualizations are central to the decisions that media organizations make in the production, distribution, and exhibition of content. In this regard, then, understanding how media organizations make sense of their audiences provides an important window into understanding the forces that affect the operation of our media system.

Such concerns have motivated scholarly inquiry into what have been described as "institutionally effective" audiences (Ettema & Whitney, 1994, p. 5) – that is, the audience as constructed by media organizations and utilized within the operation of media markets (see, e.g., Ang, 1991; Napoli, 2003). A substantial body of literature has developed around this notion of the institutionalized media audience. This literature has addressed questions such as those raised by Sonia Livingstone (1996), who asks: "What are the implications for the construction of the public/audience by the media industries and to what extent are they right or wrong?" (p. 51), and those of Raboy, et al. (2001), who advocate extending Livingstone's questions into the process

of how these audience constructions are generated, and to the forms of resistance and negotiation associated with this process.

It is important to emphasize that this literature is focused not on audience behavior, *per se;* rather, it is focused on the *production and uses* of audience information within media organizations. It is focused on how media organizations and measurement firms conceptualize audiences; how these conceptualizations have evolved; and the analytical tools and information sources that are employed in these conceptual evolutions. This literature extends back to the early days of media and communications scholarship in the 1930s, when scholars examined how media organizations ranging from motion picture studios, to newspapers, to nascent radio networks made sense of the limited audience information available to them, and extends to the present, as media organizations cope with newer media technologies such as the Web and mobile devices, and the ways that these new technologies simultaneously transform audience behavior and provide new information flows about these behaviors. This literature extends not only far back in time, but across many different national contexts, as well as across various disciplines, including marketing, communications, sociology, organizational behavior, and cultural studies. This review is an effort to pull together and synthesize these varied strands of this literature.

As this review illustrates, the historical trend in audience understanding has been one of a steady process of rationalization in how media organizations have approached their audiences. In documenting this process of the rationalization of audience understanding, this review identifies key historical moments in this process, it identifies the external forces that have influenced it, the underlying reasons for it; and the effects that it has had on the production, distribution, and exhibition of media content.

The first section of this paper discusses the concept of rationalization and how it can be related to efforts by media organizations to understand their audiences. The second section describes early efforts by media organizations to understanding their audiences. This section highlights the more intuitive approaches that preceded later, more rationalized approaches to audience understanding. The third section focuses on the 1930s as a key transition point in the transition to more rationalized approaches to audience understanding. This section highlights the influence of external forces such as the Great Depression, as well as the influence of early audience researchers such as George Gallup and Paul Lazarsfeld. The fourth section examines the second key stage in the process of the rationalization of audience understanding, which took place in the 1970s, and which can be attributed to factors such as the growing competition and fragmentation of the media environment, as well as to the increased capabilities and accessibility of computing power. The fifth section examines the dynamics of institutional resistance to the rationalization of audience understanding that has manifested itself at various times and across various stakeholder groups. Building upon this notion of resistance, the sixth section examines the range of critiques, both from academic and industry sectors, that have been leveled against this process of the rationalization of audience understanding. This section considers critiques not only of the process as a whole, but of the particular directions that this process has taken. The seventh section considers explanations for why this rationalization of audience understanding has taken hold within media organizations, and why it has followed the particular path that it has. The concluding section considers contemporary changes in the media environment and their implications for the rationalization of audience understanding. This section also considers avenues for future research.

Rationalization and its Relationship to Audience Understanding

The concept of rationalization has been interpreted in a variety of ways and has been applied both theoretically and empirically in a wide range of contexts. It is most commonly associated with the work of sociologist Max Weber (1978). Broadly, Weber (1978) defined the process of rationalization as an historical process involving the migration away from tradition. More concretely, it has been associated with processes such as increased reliance on bureaucratic organization and an increased emphasis on calculation and the generation and utilization of specialized knowledge (Weber, 1978). Subsequent explorations of the concept have identified four central components of the process of rationalization: a) the refinement of techniques of calculation; b) the enhancement of specialized knowledge; c) the extension of technically rational control over natural and social processes; and d) the depersonalization of social relationships (Brubaker, 1984). These processes of rationalization have been associated with a variety of spheres of endeavor, including management (Beniger, 1987) and public policymaking (Stone, 2001), as well as communications-related areas such as public opinion assessment (Herbst, 1995; Herbst & Beniger, 1994), marketing (Turow, 2006), and advertising (Laird, 1998).

As will become clear, all of these elements of the process of rationalization are prominent in the history of media organizations' approaches to audience understanding. Indeed, to the extent that rationalization has been described as "a central element of institutional theories of organization" (Townely, Cooper, & Oakes, 1999, p. 3), it is particularly well-suited to enhancing our understanding of how media organizations conceptualize their audiences. This connection was recognized as early as 1957 by market researcher Leo Bogart (1957), who observed that tendencies toward rationalization in the media sector "seem to have emerged as part of the same

wave of rationalization that has produced, since Frederick Taylor, several generations of industrial efficiency experts" (p. 133; see also Bogart, 1986b).

Within the context of media organizations and media audiences, the notion of the rationalization of audience understanding has involved efforts to bring greater empirical rigor and (primarily) quantitative methods to the processes of understanding a range of dimensions of audience behavior (Bogart, 1957; Carey, 1980; Maxwell, 2000), under the presumption that these analyses facilitate greater predictability and greater control of audience behavior (see, e.g., Ahlkvist, 2001; Rossman, 2008). These efforts have been pursued via the integration of various forms of analytical specialists, the gathering of various forms of (typically quantitative) data, as well as the development of increasingly specialized skill sets (Rossman, 2008; Turow, 2006).

These efforts to enhance knowledge, predictability, and control in relation to the audience have, however, been accompanied by the kinds of analytical simplifications that historically have been associated with the process of rationalization. As Beniger (1987) notes, the increased information processing that is at the core of the process of rationalization generally can only be achieved via structuring systems of information gathering and processing that are highly selective in terms of the nature of the information gathered, in order to avoid information overload. This of course limits possible perceptions or analytical orientations toward the particular social phenomenon under observation.

Also of particular importance to this analysis is the extent to which the process of rationalization not only requires advanced systems of information processing, but also the extent to which it is reliant on mechanisms for two-way communication between the observer and the observed (Beniger, 1987). Such reciprocal communication is essential for the gathering of information about those under study (in this case, the audience) in order to facilitate future

efforts at analysis and prediction. Thus, any developments that facilitate greater reciprocity in communication between media organization and audience have the potential to intensify the rationalization of audience understanding.

The Early Intuitive Model of Audience Understanding

Most historical accounts of the evolution of audience understanding within various sectors of the media industry emphasize the early reliance on what is perhaps best termed the *intuitive model*. Under this approach, the subjective, often instinctive, judgments of content producers, distributors, and exhibitors regarding audience tastes, preferences, and reactions were the primary mechanisms via which organizational decisions were made. Historical accounts of early mass media, such as motion pictures, books, and newspapers, frequently highlight this analytical approach (see, e.g., Eaman, 1994; Hagen, 1999; Handel, 1950; Powell, 1978; Silvey, 1974). Austin (1989), for instance, presents the story of Harry Cohn, President of Columbia Pictures in the 1930s and 40s, "who claimed he had a 'foolproof' method for predicting the success of a movie: 'If my fanny squirms, it's bad. If my fanny doesn't squirm, it's good'" (p. 1). Similarly, historical accounts of the newspaper industry emphasize how decision-making regarding news content was driven largely via the application of the news values and editorial judgment cultivated within the journalistic profession, with the audience existing as a somewhat distant abstraction from the standpoint of journalists and editors (see DeWerth-Pallmeyer, 1997; Sumpter, 2000).

The result of this approach was frequent information vacuums in terms of the nature of the interaction between content and audience. One account of this time period notes the observation of a 1920s-era motion picture director, who complained that "production departments of the major companies 'have not the slightest idea what happens to our pictures,'

and a director had no way of finding out 'why his picture didn't do well in the South, why his picture didn't do well in England, why his picture could not be shown in Germany'" (Maltby, 1999, p. 23).

Some analysts have suggested that the fact that the economic conditions for these early mass media were relatively favorable created little demand for more rigorous empirical analyses to guide strategic decision-making (see, e.g., Austin, 1989; Bakker, 2003). For instance, according to early film audience researcher Leo Handel (1950), "The young industry, which could readily finance research projects, found little motivation to do so because the new, expanding market was active enough to provide a highly satisfactory volume of business for the leading firms. Most motion picture executives were content to let product improvement and sales policies rest on their intuitive insight of what the public wanted, rather than on direct contact with the consumer" (pp. 3-4).

Early Steps Beyond the Intuitive Model

The description above is not intended to suggest that early media organizations were *completely* lacking in information about their audiences, or that the relationship between media organizations and their audiences has ever been a pure one-way, one-to-many model. Basic data such as box office grosses, sales, and circulation figures were available for analysis; though the analytical limitations of such data were, for the most part, readily apparent. Early motion picture audience researchers, for instance, were well aware that box office figures could not be interpreted purely as an indicator of a film's audience appeal, as these figures could be a function of other factors such as advertising and promotional strategies (see, e.g., Handel, 1950). This consequently undermined the analytical utility of box office figures as a tool for explicitly gauging audience preferences, and thus as a tool for guiding future production decisions. In

addition, the extent to which the box office figures were, at the time, completely dependent upon distributor and exhibitor cooperation (in terms of the reporting of box office grosses) raised questions about their accuracy, further limiting their analytical value (Fiske & Handel, 1946).

Other feedback mechanisms, such as audience correspondence with the content provider, have a long history (see, e.g., Lenthall, 2007; Newman, 2004; Razlogova, 1995; Turow, 1977-78). Such correspondence was utilized in audience assessment and strategic decision-making across early mass media such as motion pictures, newspapers, magazines, and eventually broadcasting (see Ohmer, 2006; Silvey, 1974). Movie studios, for instance, would measure and weigh the amount of fan mail received by their performers and "deduce from its increase or decrease the rise or fall in the popularity of the recipient" (Handel, 1950, p. 10). Most of the studios had dedicated fan mail departments engaged in such tasks, even going so far as to organize the mail according to the writer's estimated age, gender, and geographic location (Bakker, 2003).

Early efforts to more rigorously assess audiences were perhaps most pronounced in the nascent broadcasting sector. The introduction of broadcasting as a primarily ad-supported medium in countries such as the U.S. represented a somewhat different context from established media such as motion pictures and newspapers, in that the economic model provided an immediate, powerful incentive for more rationalized approaches to audience understanding – at least in terms of quantifying the size of the audience being reached by radio programming and its embedded advertising messages (Silvey, 1974). And when we add to this dynamic the more ephemeral nature of the broadcast audience, which is inherently more challenging to make concrete than print or motion picture audiences, whose behaviors could at least be represented by

tangible actions such as purchasing a publication or a ticket, the imperative to develop new systems of audience understanding became more pronounced (see, e.g., Socolow, 2004).

Consequently, in the early days of radio, stations utilized a variety of approaches to providing advertisers with audience estimates. One approach involved mapping the station's coverage area against the area's population size and demographic data (Chappell & Hooper, 1944; Kingson, 1953); another involved gathering data on the number of radios sold in a listening area (Chappell & Hooper, 1944; Kingson, 1953). Of course, such approaches provided neither the station nor the advertiser with any concrete information about the size or composition of the *actual* listening audience; rather, they simply provided a rough estimate of the potential audience for any radio program. Nonetheless, the economic model of advertiser-supported broadcasting was able to take sufficiently firm hold in an environment of such imprecision.

As was the case with motion pictures and newspapers, letters to the stations figured prominently in efforts to understand radio audiences (see, e.g., Chappell & Hooper, 1944), and often played an influential role in programmers' decision-making (Razlogova, 1995). British audience researcher Robert Silvey (1974) provides one of the more detailed discussions of how early broadcasters dealt with audience mail as a feedback mechanism in his history of audience research at the BBC. Silvey (1974) notes that, within the BBC, "seeds of doubt" about the analytical value of audience letters were quickly sown "when it became quite apparent that the overwhelming majority of letters came from middle-class writers; that some issues . . . provoked far more letters than others . . . that while many letters began 'I have never written to the BBC before,' others came from people who wrote so often that they might be called BBC pen'friends. . . . In a word, no one knows what any letter or bunch of letters is a sample of" (pp. 28-29). In 1955, the BBC went so far in its assessment of audience letters to conduct a survey in the wake

of a broadcast of George Orwell's *1984*, in which the distribution of opinions in the letters received was compared to the distribution of opinions of a broader sample of the viewing audience. The results indicated that, across groups, the ratio of approving versus disapproving audience members was similar; however, only the viewer survey sample captured the perspective of the large majority of viewers, who did not have a strong opinion about the broadcast in either direction (Silvey, 1974).[1]

Early Stages of Rationalization

The time period of the 1930s frequently emerges in the literature as a key starting point in the progression to more rationalized approaches to audience understanding (see, e.g., Hurwitz, 1984; Ohmer, 1999). There are a number of key developments during this time period that are worth noting. The economic hardships of the Depression have been identified in many historical accounts as a key driver in the development of marketing, advertising, and audience research, as marketers, advertisers, and, ultimately, media organizations, found themselves under more intense pressure to maximize the efficiency of their resource allocations and to provide "tangible" evidence that money was being spent logically and effectively (Kreshel, 1993; Lenthall, 2007; Ohmer, 2006). As NBC executive E.P.H. James noted in 1937, "when the depression descended upon us, advertisers and their agencies immediately began to check over their advertising expenditures and sought justification for every dollar spent. In so far as it was possible, sales were traced to the mediums [sic] being used, or other strong evidence was accumulated to justify the continuance of the use of each advertising medium" (p. 141).

Looking beyond the Depression, another important cultural shift taking place during this time period involved the transition from a *production culture* to a *consumption culture* that many scholars assert began to take place during the early part of the 20th century (see Lenthall, 2007;

Strasser, 1989). This transition brought with it the need for goods manufacturers to know much more about their potential consumers, how best to identify and reach them, and how best to appeal to them (Buzzard, 1990; Ward, 1996). It is worth noting that both the *Journal of Marketing* and the journal *Public Opinion Quarterly* were established during this time period (both were launched in 1936), which provides an indicator of the extent to which the intellectual infrastructure underlying these more rationalized analytical approaches to understanding the public, both as citizens and as consumers, were becoming institutionalized (see Bogart, 1957).

A number of historical analyses have identified industry-specific factors that also were drivers toward greater rationalization of audience understanding. For instance, one analysis of the motion picture industry points to factors such as rising production costs, extended contract terms with stars, and the transition from fixed fee to percentage based rental contracts, as key motivators within Hollywood to more enthusiastically embrace audience research (Bakker, 2003). Later, the rise of television dramatically altered the competitive landscape for motion pictures, and further compelled the utilization of audience research in an effort to maximize box office grosses, as studios sought information to help them retain their shrinking audience (Austin, 1989). Moreover, the (at that time) relatively short product life cycle for a single motion picture was seen as compelling studios to closely track changes in consumer preferences (Bakker, 2003).

As was noted above, the widespread commercialization of radio that took place in the U.S. in the aftermath of the passage of the Radio Act of 1927 (see McChesney, 1993) provided a particularly powerful impetus for radio programmers and advertisers to aggressively invest in, support, and utilize systematic ratings services that could bring the desired objectivity and empirical rigor to the processes of buying and selling audience attention that had been

established as the commercial model under which the industry would operate. The fact that other potential funding systems that were considered, such as a subscription-based approach, were rejected in favor of an advertising-supported model (see McChesney, 1993) created an impetus for approaching audience understanding in a particular way; one that would take into very strong account the needs and interests of the advertisers supporting the radio programming.

The Integration of Specialized Knowledge and Skills

This process of the rationalization of audience understanding involved the integration of new types of professionals into the operation of the media organizations – obviously those with strong research backgrounds and/or quantitative analytical skills.[2] Newman (2004) has described these new professionals as "audience intellectuals," and links their emergence to the emergence of the commercial radio industry in the 1930s (p. 8). Psychologists, for instance, became increasingly integrated into the work of advertising agencies (Balnaves & O'Regan, 2008; Kreshel, 1993; Socolow, 2004; Turow, 2006). Renowned public opinion pollster George Gallup (a psychologist by training) spent the early part of his career conducting newspaper audience research (Chaffee, 2000; Wood, 1962). This work grew from his doctoral dissertation, which was titled *A New Technique for Objective Methods for Measuring Reader Interest in Newspapers* (Gallup, 1928). Gallup later moved on to motion picture audience research and became a pioneering figure in that field as well (Handel, 1950; Ohmer, 1999, 2006). A number of scholars from the famed "Chicago School" of sociology, such as Lloyd Warner and Ira Glick, played an integral role in the establishment of the field of news consulting – which relies very heavily on various forms of audience research (Allen, 2005).

Perhaps most influential was sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld (1939) (in actuality a mathematician by training). Lazarsfeld played an integral role in the development of many areas

of commercial audience research, via his survey research work, as well as his work with the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer, which was a device that was used to gather and aggregate data on audience appreciation for media products ranging from radio and television programs to motion pictures (Levy, 1982). Lazarsfeld also proved tremendously influential to the development of commercial audience research via the wide-ranging radio audience research projects conducted by his Bureau of Applied Social Research during the 1930s and 1940s (Morrison, 1978; Lenthall, 2007; Newman, 2004; see also Lazarsfeld & Field, 1946).

Methodological Developments

During this period, we see the development of a number of advancements in the systematic empirical assessment of audiences.[3] For instance, in magazine publishing, we see the beginnings of detailed readership reports that went beyond basic circulation statistics to also include demographic and behavioral characteristics of magazine readers (Ward, 1996). It is also during this time period that we see the beginnings of the systematic charting and reporting of the popularity of recorded music (Hesbacher, Downing, & Berger, 1975).

Perhaps most important, we also see the beginnings of syndicated ratings services in radio (Beville, 1940; Buzzard, 1990; Karol, 1938). As one early account noted, “Fan mail was once the measure of a broadcaster’s popularity. . . These happy, innocent days came to an abrupt end when [radio audience measurement pioneer] Archibald Crossley announced a scientific audience-measurement system which would count the non-letter writing part of the audience, too” (Kingson, 1953, p. 291). Early methodological approaches to measuring radio audiences included “telephone coincidentals” (in which homes were called and asked what programs they were currently listening to), meters (electronic devices attached to radios), and paper listening diaries. It is this latter method that ultimately emerged as the standard approach to the

measurement of radio audiences (see Beville, 1988; Buzzard, 1990), and that continues to be a prominent, if no longer the primary, approach to radio audience measurement to this day.[4]

As media researcher Leo Bogart (1966) noted within the context of radio, the move to ratings systems "consisted of estimating an intangible – 'the listening experience' – rather than making a count of tangible objects – radio sets or letters to the station" (p. 48). Efforts such as these were central to establishing the fundamental exposure metrics that eventually were transferred to television (see Hurwitz, 1983; Banks, 1981) and that, to this day, continue to reside at the center of how most media organizations, advertisers, and marketers conceptualize their audience.[5]

The greater incentives for rigorous audience data in ad-supported broadcasting meant that the rationalization of audience understanding in this sector advanced more rapidly than in other sectors. As Paul Lazarsfeld (1947) noted in an early analysis comparing the state of motion picture and radio audience research:

> In movie research, the situation is somewhat different for two reasons. First, the movie industry has its box office returns as an index to work with. . . . its very existence makes it understandable that mere descriptive audience research has not developed so much with movies as with other media. Furthermore, the motion picture industry does not sell advertising. While the analysis of box office returns should be very important for the understanding of its own business, it does not need to account to anyone for the size of its audience. (p. 162)

Thus, despite being the newer medium, radio's audience research strategies and techniques soon influenced the strategies and techniques employed in older media, such as motion pictures (Bakker, 2003).[6] In the preface to his book on motion picture audiences, Leo

Handel (1950) credits Paul Lazarsfeld, “who’s trailblazing work in radio research inspired [him] to study motion picture audiences along similar lines” (p. vii). The techniques of radio audience research proved instrumental in film audience research on a number of fronts (Bakker, 2003), perhaps most notably in terms of the motion picture industry’s adoption of the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer, which quickly became a key tool used in the pre-testing of motion pictures (Fiske & Handel, 1947b). The program analyzer was used within the motion picture industry to re-edit films, as well as to determine general likes and dislikes of various audience segments in order to guide future production decisions (Fiske & Handel, 1947b). Ultimately, extensions of the Lazarsfeld-Stanton program analyzer, such as the Cirlin Reactograph (Cirlin & Peterman, 1947) were employed by motion picture industry research organizations such as the Motion Picture Research Bureau and Audience Research, Inc. (see Bakker, 2003; Ohmer, 2006).

By the 1940s, “a new research-mindedness . . . permeat[ed] all branches of the industry,” along with “an emphasis on scientific, objective analysis” (Chambers, 1947, p. 170), as the motion picture industry employed a wide range of methodological approaches to audience understanding. These included the pre-testing of completed films, the pre-testing of film titles and concepts, survey research examining the popularity of individual stars, and survey research measuring audience awareness and anticipation of upcoming films (see, e.g., Adams, 1953; Barker, 1998; Fiske & Handel, 1946, 1947a, 1947b; Handel, 1950; Ohmer, 2006). And, perhaps most important, the analyses and conclusions generated by such research approaches were being incorporated into organizational decision-making.

Stage Two in the Rationalization of Audience Understanding

If the 1930s can be identified as essentially the starting point in the process of the rationalization of audience understanding, then it appears that the 1970s represent the second

major period of advancement in this process. Many historical analyses of media industries point to the 1970s as a pivotal point in time, when a pronounced push toward greater rationalization of audience understanding took place (see, e.g., Balnaves & Regan, 2002; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Schultz, 1979). Motion picture industry historians have identified the 1970s as the point in time at which Hollywood *fully* embraced a wide range of audience information systems, after first embracing them in the 1930s and 40s (e.g., Austin, 1989). Analyses of the recorded music industry also have pointed to the 1970s as the point at which strategic decision-making moved away from more intuitive approaches toward audience understanding and began to rely heavily on various audience data sources, ranging from sales monitoring systems to radio ratings data (Negus, 1999).

Assessments of this analytical transition often point to enabling factors such as the reduction in cost and rise in power of computer systems, which brought with them an increased capacity to gather and analyze large quantities of statistical data (Buzzard, 2003; Goss, 1995; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Starr & Corson, 1987; Wehner, 2002). Not only were large quantities of data now able to be gathered, tabulated, and analyzed in a timely manner, but (with the diffusion of the personal computer and data analysis software) the tools for analyzing such information were more widely distributed (Balnaves & O'Regan, 2002; Barnes & Thomson, 1994; McKenna, 1988). These developments both facilitated and encouraged the adoption of more quantitatively oriented "scientific" approaches to organizational management and decision-making (Bogart, 1986b; Starr & Corson, 1987).

In television, audience measurement was being further rationalized via the introduction of set-top meters that not only provided a daily flow of audience data (as opposed to the much slower and intermittent data flow provided by measurement systems relying on paper diaries),

but also provided detailed demographic information about the composition of the audiences for individual programs (see, e.g., Buck, 1987; Buzzard, 2003; Wilcox, 2000). News consulting also became a firmly institutionalized practice during this time period (Allen, 2007), as television news outlets came to increasingly rely on various forms of quantitative audience research in order to calibrate their news content and on-air news staffs in an effort to attract larger audiences. These consultants proved enormously influential in altering the form and structure of television newscasts (Allen, 2007). Entertainment programs during this time period also began to undergo much more rigorous pre-testing in an effort by programmers to predict the audience appeal of the programs they were considering airing (Gitlin, 2000).

As James Carey (1980) has noted within the context of the evolution of the newspaper industry, the process of rationalization that characterized that industry (as well as other media industry sectors) was one in which first it was necessary to be able to construct the audience into a tangible, measurable mass; and then to effectively segment that mass into discrete, homogeneous sub-units in order to best satisfy the needs of marketers and advertisers, who have historically demanded ever greater levels of granularity and comprehensiveness in relation to certain dimensions of audience information – particularly exposure (see, e.g., Bogart, 1956; Dimling, 1985; Ehrenberg, 1968; Keller, 1966; Politz, 1943; Sen, et al., 1998; Smythe, 1986; Turow, 2006).

A key aspect of this process was the move away from “households” as the primary unit of analysis toward the more granular analysis of individuals, who could then, of course, be sorted into various demographic groupings. For this to happen, there needed to be both a change in the dynamics of media consumption, as well as the availability of audience information systems capable of capturing this more granular audience data. Technological developments such as the

portable transistor radio and the growth of mult-set television households have been identified as key mechanisms for the necessary changes in the dynamics of media consumption that undermined more traditional household-level approaches to media consumption (Balnaves & O'Regan, 2008). These developments were then accompanied by advancements such as set-top meters capable of capturing individual-level data and computing systems capable of analyzing the greater volume of data that resulted when the individual, rather than the household, was the unit of analysis (Buzzard, 2003).

Audience Fragmentation, Interactivity, and the New Media

From this standpoint, it is important to recognize that the increased technological fragmentation that has characterized the evolution of media (Neuman, 1991), and that began its dramatic increase in the 1970s (with the arrival of technologies such as satellite and cable television), and that would become dramatically more pronounced in the decades to follow due in large part to the diffusion of the Internet (Bermejo, 2007), is another important contributor to the increased rationalization of audience understanding that took place during this time period. This fragmentation facilitated the greater granularity in audience composition (and audience data) that many advertisers (and thus, by association, content providers) desired (Krugman, 1985; Rubens, 1984; Sen, et al., 1998; Turow, 1997).

Also, in the online realm, we have seen a pattern at work that is similar to what took place in the traditional media, in which the embracing of ad-supported models have provided much more powerful incentives for more rationalized approaches to audience understanding. For instance, early on in the development and popularization of the Internet, there was minimal demand for audience research, given that the predominant business model was focused around subscription-driven on-line services (such as Prodigy, CompuServe, and earlier incarnations of

AOL). With the growth of the Web, the lowering of the "walled gardens" employed by ISPs, and the influx of content providers relying upon advertising support, the demand for data on audience exposure blossomed (see Coffey, 2001). This growth in demand then led to an explosion in the number of firms involved in on-line audience measurement and the development of a variety of methodological approaches (Bermejo, 2007; Mullarkey, 2004).[7]

In this regard, then, the process of the rationalization of audience understanding continues apace, extending into the realms of new media. What is becoming increasingly clear at this point is that, within the new media environment, there are a wider array of analytical tools for media organizations to employ in their efforts to understand audiences. This is due in large part to the highly interactive nature of the medium, which offers a wider range of information gathering opportunities (Cover, 2006; Turow, 2006), and which breaks down many of the traditional distinctions between media and audience (Livingstone, 2003; Roscoe, 1999). Media organizations and advertisers have recognized the need for new analytical approaches (Stewart & Pavlou, 2002), though the landscape at this point remains somewhat unsettled in terms of the exact directions the newer media are going to push this ongoing process of the rationalization of audience understanding (Author, 2008). However, the increased interactivity that is at the core of these developments feeds directly into the ways that enhanced mechanisms for two-way communication between the observer and the observed can further facilitate the process of rationalization (Beniger, 1987).

Resistance

This process of rationalization of audience understanding has not proceeded smoothly. At various points in the process, resistance has been intense. Studies across a variety of organizational contexts, including newsrooms (Berkowitz & Allen, 1996; Gans, 2005), arts

organizations (DiMaggio & Useem, 1979; O'Regan, 2002), motion picture studios (Handel, 1953), publishing houses (Author, 2006), and advertising agencies (Kreshel, 1993) have identified a tendency amongst some stakeholders to be hostile towards efforts to further rationalize the process of audience understanding.

Often, this resistance has broken along professional lines, with those in more creative positions resisting the process and those in more analytical positions embracing and promoting it. Thus, for instance, in advertising, the influx of research in the early part of the 20th century was resisted by creative staff such as copywriters, while being embraced by those involved in media buying activities (Kreshel, 1993). Such resistance typically involved the prioritization of traits such as "experience, intuition, and common sense" (Kreshel, 1993, p. 61). In his assessment of early resistance in Hollywood to audience research, Leo Handel (1953) recalls that "Hollywood, by and large, resisted the development of high-level audience research. In the race between intuition and the IBM machine the latter came in a poor second. The reasons for the reluctance to use reliable audience research in the film industry are manifold. Most frequently, we hear that movie making is basically an artistic endeavor" (p. 304). During the 1940s, as audience research first grew in prominence and influence in the motion picture industry, creative personnel such as actors and writers came to the conclusion that such research "muzzled innovation" (Ohmer, 2006, p. 10). Other objections included the viability of making any kind of organizational decisions based on what one motion picture executive described as the "'whimsies of public opinion'" (Ohmer, 2006, p. 152) and the stifling of risk-taking likely to result from more research-driven decision-making (Ohmer, 2006).

This tension within the motion picture industry in terms of the positioning of motion picture production, distribution, and exhibition as art versus science persisted throughout the

1940s and 1950s (Ohmer, 2006). Within the context of this industry, such resistance was sufficiently effective that, by the late 1940s, the studios began to move away from the research being conducted by Gallup's Audience Research, Inc. and the other firms that had established a foothold in this area (Garrison, 1972; Handel, 1953; Ohmer, 2006), only to return to such analytical strategies in the 1970s (see above).

Debates about the appropriateness of relying upon systematic audience data have historically been particularly pronounced within the journalistic community, where concerns about the appropriate dividing line between "church" and "state" have a long history (see, e.g., Hujanen, 2008; McManus, 1994). Questions related to the utilization of audience research have mapped onto this persistent tension in such a way that journalists and editors often have expressed concern that reliance upon audience research in the production of news inevitably undermines established news values, as well as the subjective news judgments of journalists (see Beam, 1995; DeWerth-Pallmeyer, 1997). One study posited that journalists' resistance to audience research has stemmed from four factors: a) the liberal arts education background (and associated discomfort with statistics) that typifies most journalists; b) insufficient evidence, from journalists' perspective, that such data are useful; c) the doubts that such research may cast on journalists' news judgments and professional autonomy; and d) the fact that audience research frequently is conducted by non-journalists (see Gans, 2005). A study of Australian newsrooms similarly found a "defensive culture resistant to readership and audience research" (Green, 2002).

Another important point of delineation as it relates to resistance involves the divide between commercial and public service media. A number of accounts of the operation of public service media (e.g., public broadcasting) have highlighted the extent to which professionals

within such organizations have resisted, though in most cases, eventually succumbed, to the pressures to conduct and rely upon sophisticated audience research (Stavitsky, 1993, 1995).[8] As Robert Silvey (1974) notes in his history of audience research at the BBC, "the BBC did not set about studying its public systematically until ten years after it had become a public corporation" (p. 28). Once, however, the transition toward rationalized audience understanding was initiated at the BBC, the shift in that direction was dramatic, and some observers saw that as antithetical to the BBC's mission. Born (2002), for instance, chronicles the changing organizational culture of the BBC, in which the rise of what she terms the "new managerialism" (p. 69) in the 1980s and 1990s led to a heavy reliance on audience research in programming decisions and, consequently, less creative autonomy for individual production departments – a transition which caused substantial tension within the organization.

And, not surprisingly, as public service media sectors have become privatized and commercialized in various nations, their demand for, and utilization of, audience data has increased (Hagen, 1999). As BBC audience researcher Robert Silvey (1974) noted, "The demand for audience measurement was, of course, far less clamant in countries served by non-commercial broadcasting. They had no advertisers to satisfy or persuade to buy time. There was also far less demand for moment-to-moment audience measurement for this mainly derived from the need to know how many people heard the commercials. In the context of public service broadcasting the need for audience measurement came mainly from the programme planners' concern to assess the effect, in terms of consumption, of the pattern of broadcasting they had devised" (p. 77). Armand Mattelart (1991) documents this pattern across a number of different nations, including the U.K., Canada, France, Brazil, and Venezuela.

U.S. public broadcasters similarly initially exhibited resistance to audience research on the grounds that such research represented the encroachment of commercial imperatives into their public service mission (Stavitsky, 1993). However, declines in federal funding contributed to a willingness among public broadcasters to adopt such techniques in an effort to better understand the audiences who were becoming an increasingly significant source of operating funds and in order to better document public broadcasting's relevance (as reflected in the size of the audience) to Congress and other potential funders such as charitable foundations (Stavitsky, 1995, 1998).

It is also important to note that, in many cases, resistance has arisen from concerns over how new and (presumably) improved approaches to understanding audiences might affect the competitive dynamics within a particular industry sector. Thus, for instance, the evolution of audience measurement in television has been accompanied, at various stages, by resistance from those stakeholders who were most likely benefiting from whatever methodological biases were inherent in the status quo system. The move from paper diaries to set top people meters by Nielsen Media Research (see Buzzard, 2002) was challenged by broadcasters in the U.S. at both the national level in the 1980s and the local level in the 2000s, in the face of indicators that the people meters removed biases in the diary method that were inflating broadcast ratings relative to cable ratings (see Napoli, 2005). From this standpoint, it is important to emphasize, as many studies have, the extent to which changes in a system of audience measurement can produce very different portraits of the audience, and thereby lead to dramatic changes in how advertising dollars are allocated and in the type of content that is produced (see, e.g., Adams, 1994; Barnes & Thomson, 1988; 1994; Peterson, 1994)

Critiques

Many of these instances of resistance reflect broader critiques that have emerged over the years from within both academic and industry sectors in regards to the rationalization of audience understanding and/or the particular directions it has taken (see, e.g., Buck, 1987; Doscher, 1947; Eaman, 1994; Meehan, 1984; Savage, 2006; Schiavone, 1988). Pioneering market researcher Leo Bogart (1986a) criticized what he described as "formula thinking," which he sees as "demand[ing] ever greater amounts of marketing and media information extracted from single samples of overloaded respondents in the form of syndicated research" (p. 102). Such research, he argues:

> tends to deflect advertising research from a confrontation with significant issues in communication. Instead, it favors bovine mastication of transient data that are already obsolete by the time they are published. Formula thinking also increases the pressure for proof of performance, as though the advertiser could put in dollars at one end of the sausage grinder, with proven evaluation of effects emerging at the other end. And formula thinking resists the argument that real life is complicated and that things don't work that way. (Bogart, 1986a, p. 102)

As these critiques suggest, it is important to emphasize that this rationalization of audience understanding evolved in very specific directions, to the neglect of other potential directions (Wehner, 2002), particularly within the context of advertising-supported media. This pattern is reflective of the process of simplification of observable phenomena that is central to the process of rationalization (Beniger, 1987). The overwhelming tendency within the context of media organizations has been one of the quantification of audience size and (later) composition, to the neglect of other dimensions of the audience. As Paul Lazarsfeld noted as early as 1947, "Questions of preference in radio research have been almost discarded in favor of actual listening

figures. But this is not necessarily the best solution. It may be just as important to know that a person likes a certain program, although it happens to be on the air at a time when he or she cannot listen" (pp. 165-166).[9] Much of the early audience research conducted by Lazarsfeld's Radio Research Project reflected his concern with understanding audience appreciation of radio programming (see, e.g., Wiebe, 1939),[10] though broadcast industry approaches to audiences ultimately went in a very different direction. We find such critiques even earlier in the history of audience research. As one analysis pointed out in 1936, "We have lost sight of our primary purpose for measuring radio programs. What we really want to know is not how many persons are listening . . . the real information that we desire is just how much influence the program in question is exerting on sales" (Likert, 1936, p. 175).

More public interested-oriented concerns also frequently underlie this critique of media industries' traditional emphasis on exposure. Typically, these critiques emphasize the very limited conceptualization of the audience that is reflected in an exposure-oriented analytical approach, and the fact that such an analytical approach is much more reflective of the needs and interests of the content providers and advertisers than it is of the needs and interests of the audience (Ang, 1991; Meehan, 1984).[11] These concerns become particularly pronounced within media policy-related contexts, such as the funding and organizational mandates for public service media, or other contexts where an understanding of the public's media usage can usefully inform policymaking (see, e.g., Author, 2006; Raboy, Abramson, Proulx, & Welters, 2001). Here, the fact that audience research often is used as a mechanism for essentially gauging the public interest and making decisions accordingly means that any analytical approach that oversimplifies the nature of the public (as audience) and its needs and interests will lead to poor policy decisions (see, e.g., Eaman, 1994).

Such concerns have prompted an extensive dialogue addressing the important distinctions between the audience as citizen and the audience as consumer (Butsch, 2000; Livingstone, Lunt, & Miller, 2007a, 2007b; Raboy, et al., 2001; Syvertsen, 2004; Webster & Phalen, 1994). Some analyses of the media-audience relationship, for instance, have concluded that the early days of mass media exhibited a much stronger tendency to approach their audiences as citizens rather than consumers, and offered programming options more reflective of the needs of citizens rather than those of consumers and the advertisers seeking to reach consumers (Butsch, 2008). Others have concluded that, within policy discourse, a consumer-oriented analytical frame is eclipsing a citizen-oriented analytical frame (Livingstone, Lunt, & Miller, 2007a, 2007b) as policymakers grapple with how to address new media technologies (see Gandy, 2002). Broader conceptualizations of the audience, that account not only for the basic elements of media usage and exposure, but also approach audiences as "as individuals with complex socioeconomic positionings" have been advocated as essential to better media policymaking and to media that better serve the public interest (Raboy, et al., 2001, p. 101).[12]

As this discussion suggests, at many points in the history of the rationalization of audience understanding there have been calls, both from within academic and industry sectors, for systems of audience measurement that move beyond exposure and consider other dimensions of the audience, such as appreciation or impact (see, e.g., Hoffman & Batra, 1991; Philport, 1993). Efforts to respond to such calls in the development of audience information systems, have, however, historically failed to take hold, particularly in the realm of ad-supported media. Kingson (1953) describes an early radio audience measurement service launched by the Schewerin Research Corporation, which employed an audience panel and a program analyzer type of device to measure not only the size of the audience, but also audience reactions to

individual radio programs. This service was subsequently expanded to television, but in neither context did it displace established exposure-based systems. In the 1980s, similar efforts within the context of television by the Markle Foundation-funded enterprise, Television Audience Assessment, Inc., similarly failed to take hold (Mitgang, 2002).[13] Advertising researcher Joseph Philport (1993) describes his efforts at developing "qualitative ratings systems" for a variety of constituents in the television and radio industries, though "each of these efforts failed to evolve into a sound commercial application" (p. RC-5).

The failure of such initiatives also serves to highlight the common critique with the "ratings" terminology, which has been described as "implicitly and misleadingly conveying the impression of an evaluative response to programmes . . . when all they represent is a measure of presence" (Gunter & Wober, 1992, p. 101). Leo Bogart (1976) summed up the situation as follows: "variations in the intensity and character of the reading experience (as of the radio listening experience) have conventionally been ignored by both buyers and sellers of advertising. The advent and growth of television only added to the emphasis on 'boxcar' figures that showed the largest possible potential *exposure*" (p. 110; emphasis added). A more recent assessment led to a similar conclusion, that the history of audience measurement has been one in which "Other forms of knowledge were invented, but discarded" (Oswell, 2002, p. 115).

Efforts to think about and analyze the audience in ways that extend beyond basic exposure have only been meaningfully embraced in certain contexts. We see this in the realm of non-commercial broadcasting, for instance, where the organizational mission is often less about maximizing audience size and more about maximizing audience satisfaction (Emmett, 1968; Jeffrey, 1994; Keegan, 1980; Silvey, 1944, 1951, 1974). Jeffrey (1994) documents such efforts within the context of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, where systematic measurements of

program *quality* (as perceived by audience members) have been utilized. One approach involved the creation of an Enjoyment Index, which asked television viewers to rate their level of enjoyment of the programs they watched on a five-point scale (Eaman, 1994). This index was employed for more granular analyses, including the assessment of individual characters, as well as program elements such as the story, dialogue, and settings (Eaman, 1994).

The BBC has similarly employed systematic efforts to determine the extent to which its programming is effectively serving the needs and wants of its audience (see, e.g., Emmett, 1968). BBC audience researcher Robert Silvey (1974), for instance, chronicles his realization in the 1940s that "in a properly balanced audience research service the continuous measurement of the quantity of listening – the estimation of the size of each programme's audience – should be supplemented by a continuous assessment of audience reaction – what listeners felt about the programmes they were listening to" (p. 113). From this perspective, the BBC went on to develop an Appreciation Index, which was derived from questions gauging the extent to which audiences enjoyed individual broadcasts (Silvey, 1974).

It is also interesting to note that, early on, the BBC decided not to publish a list of its top 20 programs based on the conviction that "Top Twenties encouraged an entirely fallacious impression of the real significance of audience size: that every broadcast had the same target – the entire population – and that they were therefore all to be judged by the extent to which their audiences approached that goal. . . . There was no virtue in size per se, all that mattered was whether a broadcast attracted the audience which it was reasonable to expect of it" (Silvey, 1974, p. 185).[14] To a certain extent, this decision can be seen as reflective of the BBC's research findings at the time related to television viewership, which indicated little meaningful

relationship between audience size and the intensity of audience appreciation for the content consumed (Silvey, 1951).

In the realm of some consumer-supported media (e.g., motion pictures) there also has been, and continues to be, greater emphasis on probing the more "qualitative" aspects of an audience's interaction with content. Thus, for instance, motion picture audience research has traditionally devoted a substantial amount of attention to what extent audience members enjoy particular films, for what reasons do they enjoy the films, and what changes could be made to increase their enjoyment of the films (see, e.g., Doscher, 1947; Handel, 1950; Hayes & Bing, 2006).

In the extreme, such approaches to audience understanding are practiced in such a way as to explicitly avoid any subjective assessments of content or its likely audience appeal, reflecting the depersonalization that has historically been a part of the process of rationalization. In a study of radio programmers and the process by which they gauge audience song preferences, Ahlkvist (2001) found that, for those programmers employing a research-oriented programming philosophy, "The lynch pin of this programming philosophy is not to listen to the music. Programmers should be far more concerned with 'the numbers' provided by audience research than they are with determining the viability of a song on their own by listening to how it sounds" (p. 349; see also Ahlkvist & Faulkner, 2002).

A broader, and very common, critique involves concerns over how more rationalized approaches to audience understanding may stifle innovation, risk-taking and diversity in the production of media content, and instead promote imitation, repetition, and homogenization (e.g., McCourt & Rothenbuhler, 1997). In her study of George Gallup and his role in the development of motion picture research, Ohmer (2006) describes how the research conducted by

Gallup's Audience Research Institute (ARI) factored prominently into movie studio RKO's decision to abandon efforts at producing "prestige films and artistic features," and focus instead purely on more commercially-oriented films. Ohmer (2006) also notes how ARI's studies examining which roles audiences would like to see stars appear in tended to conclude that the stars should perform in parts that were highly consistent with their established screen personas. According to Ohmer (2006), "This result can be explained in part by ARI's methods: since the institute gave people a list of projects from which to choose, with only a short synopsis for each, filmgoers would be inclined to select stories that resembled a star's previous roles" (p. 143).[15] Seldes (1950) has described such pre-testing methods as simply "providing justification for repeating . . . formulas," and as a result, "The sheer mass of duplicated material will increase" (p. 223).

Similar findings have emerged in analyses of other sectors of the media industry. As was noted previously, Born's (2002) analysis of the impact that an increased reliance on audience data had on decision-making within the BBC concluded that creativity was stifled, and that the broadcaster's "capacity for difference" consequently eroded" (p. 86). Similarly, Ahlkvist and Fisher's (2000) analysis of the radio industry demonstrated an empirical connection between a station's reliance upon research and consultants and its tendency toward standardization in its programming practices.

Explanations

At the core of this process toward greater rationalization of audience understanding is the notion that there is a tremendous amount of uncertainty involved in assessing both demand for, and consumption of, most forms of media content (Hagen, 1999; Napoli, 2003). Audiences across all media are notoriously unpredictable in terms of their preferences, making the

prediction of successes and failures incredibly difficult (Bernt, Fee, Gifford, & Stempel, 2000; Caves, 2000; McQuail, 1969). Screenwriter William Goldman's (1983) famous adage about the motion picture industry's understanding of its audience, "Nobody knows anything" (p. 39) has received empirical support not only within the context of film (De Vany, 2004), but within other media industry sectors as well (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Caves, 2000; Gitlin, 2000). Nonetheless, organizations that deal with audiences must try to anticipate audience preferences and make decisions accordingly (Gitlin, 2000; Maltby, 1999; Pekurny, 1982). When these predictions are inaccurate (in terms of overestimating audience demand), the economic consequences for a media firm can be disastrous, with the firm unable to recoup the large upfront costs associated with producing the media product (De Vany, 2004; Gitlin, 2000).

Research traditionally has been seen as a key mechanism for reducing this uncertainty, and thus facilitating better-informed decision-making (Anand & Peterson, 2000). Ideally, audience data can reduce uncertainty, facilitate more effective predicting of audience behavior, and consequently, more effective strategic decision making. The process here is, of course, one of bringing something (media consumption) that traditionally has been, to varying degrees, somewhat intangible, into more tangible relief, thereby facilitating a greater array of historical, strategic, and predictive analyses (see, e.g., Napoli, 2003). Historical trends in audience behavior commonly are used to try to anticipate audience preferences (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Hirsch, 1972), despite the fact that evidence suggests this technique is not particularly effective at identifying future successes (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Eastman, 1998).[16]

Nonetheless, control (be it real or perceived) often has been seen as a key underlying motivation for this process of rationalization (Ang, 1991; Beniger, 1987; Kreshel, 1990; McCourt & Rothenbuhler, 1997; Wehner, 2002). Within the context of media audiences, it has

been argued that the increased predictability that comes from rigorous gathering and analysis of audience data leads to increased control over what can be a very unruly and unpredictable audience (Carlson, 2006; Rohle, 2007). The presumption here is that such knowledge can be used in ways to influence behaviors, or at least make them more predictable. Critics of this presumption, however, have questioned whether greater knowledge truly facilitates greater control (e.g., Ohmer, 2006). [17] In his analysis of the construction of the children's television audience in the U.K., Oswell (2002) argues that "truths about audiences" actually exacerbate insecurity rather than contribute to greater confidence and control over the audience – content provider relationship (p. 116).

Some analyses have suggested that this process of rationalization of audience understanding may have been (and continues to be) as much about establishing and maintaining symbolic indicators of professionalism and legitimization as it has been about uncertainty reduction or control (Kreshel, 1990, 1993; Schwoch, 1990). Austin (1989), for instance, sees the motion picture industry's desire to improve its image in the eyes of the investment community as a key motivator for the industry's adoption of systematic audience information systems. As Starr and Corson (1987) have speculated in relation to the broader trend favoring data-driven decision-making across a variety of organizational decision-making contexts, "It is difficult to say how much of the new demand for data stems from a rational need for exact information to improve organizational performance and how much comes from the symbolic value of numbers in the competition for influence within organizations" (p. 422). From this standpoint, the symbolic value of data as "ritualistic assurance that appropriate attitudes about decision making exist" can generate powerful incentives to gather more data than are needed, or that can be effectively analyzed (Feldman & March, 1981, p. 177). Some critics have been more blunt, arguing that the

reliance on more rationalized approaches to audience understanding is less about the *formulation* of decisions and more about the *justification* of decisions (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Bogart, 1986b; Seldes, 1950).

More narrowly, we can also try to explain why the rationalization of audience understanding proceeded down the particular path that it did. That is, why were certain elements of audience behavior the focus of this process, while others resided at the margins? In particular, why did exposure become the overwhelming focus of audience conceptualizations within the ad-supported media? In an early effort at addressing these questions, Bogart (1969) argues that more complex aspects of audiences' interaction with content have been neglected due largely to the fact they are "difficult, expensive and time-consuming to disentangle from other forces" (p. 5). As a result, "Advertisers rely on the same data sources, simply because of the economy of syndicated research . . . over customized research. The same numbers, applied by the same formulas, produce similar strategies and decisions" (Bogart, 1976, p. 109).[18]

Hurwitz (1988) argues that an early conflation of quality and popularity took place in audience research, a conflation that Buxton (1994) illustrates was central to the fissure that quickly grew between early academic and industry audience research. Drawing upon 1930s-era correspondence of audience researcher Hadley Cantril, Buxton (1994) illustrates how, even in the formative years of broadcasting, commercial broadcasters were reluctant to engage in or support audience research that extended beyond a very narrow band of audience dimensions, as the findings of such research might not, for a variety of reasons, be in their best interests. Instead, a very strong early connection was forged between the industry's audience research and market research. As a result, the priorities of market researchers largely eclipsed the somewhat different priorities that characterized early audience researchers (Hurwitz, 1988). By many

accounts, this “convergence” of market research with audience research (at least as it is practiced by media industries) has persisted (e.g., Wehner, 2002).

A key aspect of these explanations is the extent to which they suggest that institutionalized approaches to audience understanding reflect a tendency to travel the path of least resistance. According to [Author] (2008), this tendency represents a fundamental element of the process of what he terms *audience evolution*, which he argues only takes place when a particular set of circumstances are in place that reconfigure the path of least resistance in ways that dictate a fundamental departure from the status quo.

Conclusion

This review has charted the process of the rationalization of audience understanding that has taken place within media organizations via a review and synthesis of the literature that has explored how media organizations make sense of their audiences. This review has documented key historical moments, circumstances, and figures. It also has examined the dynamics of resistance to – and criticism of – these processes, and the broader explanations of why this phenomenon has occurred and followed the particular path that it has taken.

Today’s media environment represents a rapidly changing context in which this process of the rationalization of audience understanding will persist (see, e.g., Livingstone, 1999); and as a result, the path that this process has taken thus far may shift dramatically. Specifically, the unprecedented fragmentation of the media environment instigated by developments such as broadband delivery platforms ranging from the Internet to digital cable, satellite, and broadcasting, to the introduction of mobile devices such as the iPod, all combine to challenge the viability of established exposure-focused approaches to audience understanding (Author, 2008).

Media audiences are, in many ways, becoming too fragmented to have the distribution of their attention across all available content options effectively measured.

However, many of the same technologies that are, on the one hand, undermining established institutionalized approaches to audience understanding are at the same time opening up new avenues for audience understanding. As has been well-documented, the media environment is changing in ways that are dramatically reconfiguring how, when, and where audiences consume media (Cover, 2006; Livingstone, 2003). The increased interactivity of newer communications technologies, via mechanisms such as search engines, electronic program guides, DVRs, wikis, blogs, and digital set-top boxes, brings with it a variety of new paths for gathering information about audiences that extends well beyond exposure, touching upon dimensions of the audience ranging from their appreciation or emotional response to the content they consume, to their recall of or engagement with the content, to specific behavioral responses (Author, 2008).

New commercial audience information systems are developing around these various aspects of audience behavior – aspects that have, as this review has suggested, resided near the margins of media organizations' conceptualization of their audiences. And, most important, these alternative representations of audience behavior are beginning to find their way into strategic planning, marketing, and advertising sales practices of media organizations (Author, 2008). We may, therefore, be at the beginning of what [Author] (2008) describes as a *post-exposure audience marketplace*, in which the rationalization of audience understanding tracks in a dramatically different direction.

Clearly, then, this is an important time for scholars to examine the nature of the institutionalized media audience and its place in the operation of media industries. Future

research needs to delve deeply into these transformative processes that are taking place, to examine how the ongoing changes in the media environment (in terms of both media technologies and in terms of audience information systems) may be both undermining established approaches to audiences and facilitating new approaches. Future research needs to examine the dynamics of resistance and negotiation that are likely to develop around these processes, and to consider the political, cultural, and public policy ramifications arising from this latest stage in the rationalization of audience understanding.

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Endnotes

[1] For further discussion of early research illustrating disconnects between fan mail and other forms of audience data, see Socolow (2004).

[2] In his description of the evolution of advertising and media buying in response to the advent of radio, Leo Bogart (1989) notes that "the creation of advertising and the management of media selection became more complex, more technical, and more specialized, and the structure of agencies changed accordingly" (p. 50). As a result, "agencies developed specialized departments for research, for sales promotion, for merchandising, for public relations" (Bogart, 1989, p. 50).

[3] This section addresses only a few key developments in the methods employed by media organizations to understand their audiences. A wide range of much more detailed discussions of the methodologies of audience measurement across different media and national contexts, and how they have evolved over time, are available. See, for instance, Balnaves & O'Regan (2002); Banks (1981); Bermejo (2007); Beville (1988); Buck (1987); Buzzard (1990); Chappell & Hooper (1944); Eaman (1994); Handel (1950); Hurwitz (1983); Kent (1994); Klopfenstein (1990); Meehan (1993); Robinson (2000); Webster, Phalen, & Lichty (2005); and Starkey (2004).

[4] Today, paper diaries are being replaced by Portable People Meters in many of the largest radio markets in the United States. The majority of the radio markets in the U.S., however, continue to be measured via the paper diary (Arbitron, 2008). Similar portable meters are replacing paper diaries in other nations as well (Mytton, 2007).

[5] As broadcast researcher Hugh M. Beville noted in 1940, "audience size [is] certainly the most important consideration in a mass medium such as radio" (p. 204). It is also important to note,

however, that at various points in time the exact criteria for what constitutes exposure have been the subject of debate (see, e.g., Bermejo, 2007; Allen, 1965; Clancey, 1993).

[6] As Bakker (2003) notes, early motion picture audience research "was closely connected to methods developed for the radio industry. P.F. Lazarsfeld, who ran the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, primarily researched radio audiences, for example, but at times diverted to motion pictures" (p. 108).

[7] For a detailed account of the evolution of Internet audience measurement, see Bermejo (2007).

[8] Downing (2003) examines the somewhat similar context of alternative media (which often are non-commercial in their orientation) and finds a similar pattern, in which resistance to audience research is a function of factors such as a desire to resist "the ethos of commercial user research," as well as fundamental resource inadequacies that discourage media outlets from engaging in systematic research about their audiences (p. 627).

[9] A similar critique during this time period argued that there is a "fundamental weakness of today's audience research: failure to study the listener except in terms of his numbers. It has long been realized in psychological research that in social situations measurement in and of itself rarely produces knowledge, either useful or theoretical. It is in the combination of statistical and motivational research that most meaningful socio-psychological knowledge is made" (Robinson, 1947, p. 50).

[10] For other examples of early radio research that focused on audience appreciation of radio programming, see Coutant (1939) and Longstaff (1939). Lazarsfeld's influence can be seen in later work produced by Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research that looked at early television audiences (see Steiner, 1963).

[11] Ross and Nightingale (2003) provide a detailed overview of the major critiques that have been leveled against the prioritization of exposure within commercial media industries and their associated audience measurement firms (see pp. 55-57).

[12] For discussions of the areas of intersection between citizen- and consumer-oriented approaches to audiences, and their relationship to early audience research, see Glickman (2006) and Schudson (2006).

[13] For a detailed overview of both the academic and commercial research initiatives related to audience appreciation of media content, across a variety of national contexts, see Gunter and Wober (1992).

[14] For a discussion of similar concerns in relation to the publication of best-seller lists in the book publishing industry, see Korda (2001).

[15] For a contemporary critique of ARI's methods, see Borneman (1947), who contends that the quality and success of motion pictures was by "showmen's unwillingness to please the public but precisely the opposite: the result of their too ambitious attempt to satisfy yesterday's expectations. Surrendering the job of firing the public mind to new horizons of adventure, the showmen followed the pollsters so deeply into the morass of the lowest common denominator that their birthright as entertainers and artists got stuck somewhere along the road" (p. 40).

[16] From the earliest days of the rationalization of audience understanding, some critics have seen efforts to empirically gauge and predict audience tastes and preferences as an exercise in futility by audience and market researchers that fails to realize that most "of their research practices were not adaptable to the cultural field. . . . Obviously, the premise of a stable audience with reasonably permanent and objectively verifiable needs does not hold in the cultural field.

Transplanted from economics to culture, this premise became an obvious interference with the free play of human intelligence" (Borneman, 1947, p. 33; see also Seldes, 1950).

[17] Another example of a more critical perspective on the relationship between data and control within the realm of audience behavior is well-represented in Susan Ohmer's (2006) study of public opinion pollster George Gallup and his role in the development of motion picture audience research, in which she argues that "Numbers connote *a sense of control* and *foster the illusion* that the multiplicity of experience can be contained" (p. 7, emphasis added).

[18] According to Bogart (1976) the result of this tendency is that resources are not likely to be appropriately allocated, as the emphasis on audience size over message impact creates "a disproportionate demand for the media at the top of the list and a disproportionate handicap for those that rate low" (Bogart, 1976, p. 109).