Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere

Edited by Sonia Livingstone
Bristol: Intellect, 2005
246 pages
ISBN 1-84150-129-8
Softback
£19.95

The starting point of this volume of essays is the notion that understandings, values and identities of the “public” or “publics” are becoming increasing mediated through technological and discursive means.

In her introduction, Sonia Livingstone notes that forms of mediation are themselves changing and are becoming more pervasive, subtle and diversified through mass and interactive communication. The technological shift in communicative forms is leading to the blurring of traditional boundaries between work and leisure, education and entertainment, the domestic and civic spheres, and the local and global spheres.

By exploring the intersection between the fields of publics and media audiences, the essays in this volume provide an illuminating account of how these mediation of publics matters. The book presents a convincing argument for the need for researchers to adopt interdisciplinary approaches that will extend understandings of the impact of new communication technologies on relations between publics and audiences.

An underlying assumption throughout the volume is that it is problematic to rest on traditional conceptions that oppose mass and elite culture, or on conceptions in which audiences are subsumed within the broader notion of public or publics. These conceptual debates are framed by a number of what are referred to as “Alice in Wonderland questions”: When is an audience acting such that it constitutes or is participating as a public? When does it matter that a public is also an audience? When is an audience not a public? When is a public not an audience?

The eight chapters that make up Audience and Publics deal with a number of complex concepts in clear and accessible language, providing fresh insights into how and why traditional demarcations between publics and audience no longer hold. Drawing on empirical studies, the early chapters focus on television to interrogate traditional binaries that have influenced accounts of publics and audiences. The fifth and sixth chapters extend the discussion to live music and theatre audiences, whilst the final two chapters focus on studies of the impact of interactive media, including mobile phones, chat rooms and blogs, in reconstituting the civic participation.

Though framed within a European context, the work presents a lucid account of the rapidly changing nature of publics and audiences in ways that will be of interest to a wider readership, including media educators, professionals and administrators, as well as researchers in the fields of political and social science and the broader humanities. By juxtaposing accounts of both media and live arts audiences and publics, the book provides new insights that will also be invaluable to arts industry administrators, policy-makers and programme managers.

A striking aspect of this book is its sustained analysis of the semantics of key terms related to evolving and overlapping notions of public(s) and audiences. An appendix that examines meanings and usage of key terms across several European languages complements the scholarly essays, intended as a means of addressing the dominance of English-language concepts in media studies, the appendix also serves as a springboard for future research and cross-cultural analysis.

Livingstone argues that since the activities of publics are predicated on, resource by and sustained by people in private, the normative or oppositional treatment of the terms public and audience is questionable. A more generative approach would be to explore an intermediate realm understood in terms of "the civic." Livingstone points to the need for research that addresses the way that diverse media have become intertwined in public and civic processes, transforming the activities of audiences so that they are more closely integrated with publics and the political process. In this context, she asks whether the media can play a role in challenging the limits of governmentality instead of merely serving its interests.

In the second chapter Daniel Dayan proposes a view of "the public" as a "myth" that becomes a sociological reality through its performative dimension. He argues that publics and audiences do not exist exclusively or in isolation from each other but operate in a relation of reversibility. Publics begin as audiences and are mobilized through issues that are mediated by the media. Audiences, on the other hand, are publics only when the members decide to unite and go public on an issue. Dayan observes that it is the process of mediation via the media's gate-keeping activities that determines whether and when audiences will be constituted as publics.

If you wish to have your book reviewed in the International Journal of Arts Management, please send one copy to the Book Review Editor:

Jennifer Radbourne
Assistant Dean
Faculty of Business
Queensland University of Technology
2 George Street
GPO Box 2434
Brisbane QLD 4001
AUSTRALIA
Phone: (61) 7 3864 1792
Fax: (61) 7 3864 1771
E-mail: j.radbourne@qut.edu.au
a movement from public as spectator to public as actor in an arena that emphasizes exhibition and display rather than collectively organized demonstration. Mehl's account highlights the difficulty of assessing what counts as debate and participatory democracy, as opposed to mere trivialization and obscuration of crucial issues in a context where subjective expression is as important as formulation. Mehl's observations suggesting that the degree to which the power of publics and of rational political citizenship is diluted by the distractions and minutiae of individualized narratives, enabled and promoted by the media, merit further examination.

In the fourth chapter these questions are thrown into further relief by Mirza Madianou's elaboration of the way in which program content can be exclusionary and create invisible barriers to participation and public citizenship. Based on empirical studies of news consumption among Greek, Greek Cypriot and Turkish-speaking audiences, this chapter challenges assumptions about audiences and publics based on the public/private, rational/emotional and interested/disinterested divides. Madianou takes the view that publics are heterogeneous and plural, and she looks at moments in the media landscape that catalyse participation or exclusion.

In the next chapter Hanna Meinhof raises some interesting questions about the role and potency of the creative arts in mobilizing publics and political participation. She examines whether audiences are initiated into publics so as to articulate specific political issues via what is commercially available in the arts. This is an insightful study of the live performance of Malagasy music in differentiated cultural contexts. It highlights the way in which live performance can go beyond mere entertainment to catalyse audiences around political issues.

The notion of how and where the arts constitute alternative audiences and how publics and live audiences intersect with television audiences is further illuminated in Roberta Pearson's analysis of theatre audiences. In her account of a study conducted at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2001, the author concludes that public and private, commercial culture and public culture are not divided. This analysis suggests that there is no such thing as a television audience or a theatre audience, but that issues of subsidies and affordability create false divisions between the two. Pearson makes the crucial point that whilst modes of engagement differ amongst regular and less-initiated audiences, the primary issue of access is what determines the make-up of theatre audiences and publics.

The two final chapters in this volume examine mediation of the public/private boundary at home and the emerging phenomena of mobile audiences and publics. Sonia Livingstone looks at issues of power underlying the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure, private and public, local and global. With a particular focus on the experience of children and the uses of new media by young people, she presents a broader view of how these phenomena relate to issues of interest, profit, participation, governance and privacy. An important insight or provocation for some is the suggestion that children adopt new media to create a different kind of privacy and independence through which to explore selfhood and to develop a sustaining peer network. In broader terms, Livingstone points out that maintaining fundamentalist divisions between the private and public spheres tends to serve the interests of elites.

Drawing on studies of the use of text messaging, radio and television by political activists in Manila, Kirsten Drotter argues that the notion of mobile and portable publics has profound implications for understanding political activism. Reflecting the general import of this book, Drotter concludes that there is a need for sustained interdisciplinary approaches to examining the impact of the diverse mediation of publics and audience made possible by new communication technologies.

The rapidly changing landscape of new communication technologies and their impact on publics and audiences pose enormous chal-

Estelle Barrett
Senior Lecturer
School of Communication and Creative Arts
Faculty of Arts
Deakin University
Burwood, Victoria, Australia