

Beyond the Audience: Rethinking Participation and Power in the Age of Data Capitalism

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IULM, University

Keynote speakers

-Tiziana Terranova, University of Naples 'L'Orientale'

-TBC

Description

The audience regards a “large number of unidentifiable people, usually united by their participation in media use” (Hartley 2002, p. 11), yet it is always already plural, diverse, fragmented, fluid and in many ways “ungraspable”, both everywhere and nowhere (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2023, p. 38). In the age of data capitalism, audiences become users and creators, seemingly blurring the division between the official and the vernacular, the elite and popular. Yet the vast majority of audiences remain in a subordinate position vis-à-vis the owners of the platform or elite audience members (e.g., influencers) insofar as platforms control their creativity, interaction, and usage. In this regard, although analytically helpful, terms such as “creators” and “users” may be romanticizing the division between the few and the many.

The discussion above echoes tensions between two critical yet seemingly opposing, if not contradictory, audience roles discussed in critical media studies. The political economy approach, argues that by exploiting audience time, attention, data and sociality, digital media treat audiences as commodities (Smythe, 1977), labourers (Terranova, 2001) and subjectify them in the lifeworld of surveillance and platform capitalism (Zuboff, 2019; Andrejevich, 2020; Srnicek, 2017; Fuchs, 2015). Developed in the 1970s by Dallas Smythe and later guided critical political economy approaches in media and communication (e.g., Mosco, 2009), the audience-commodity thesis became again relevant after 2010s with the blatant

commodification of media and the rise of smartphones and digital platforms; it has been reflected in critical works, including that of Evgeny Morozov (2020), Mark Andrejevic (2013), Jodi Dean (2010), Christian Fuchs (2015; 2020) and has been popularized beyond academic with the theses of “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2017) and platform capitalism (Sadowski, 2020). On the other hand, there is the “active audience”, a figure clustered around cultural studies and ethnography, where audiences casually and routinely *do* things with social media, exercising their voice, agency and empowerment. The active audience prioritizes the uses of media over the structures determining usage (Ambercombie, 1998), partaking of the enthusiasm that characterized the early days of internet research in media and communication studies, including the idea of a new and booming participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). There have been attempts to bridge these approaches, such as in Nick Couldry’s concept of the “media manifold” (2016), Ytre-Arne’s and Das’ unpacking of “communicative agency” in datafication (2021) or the “duality of media” by James G. Webster (2011). The spread of deepfakes complicates this media landscape, contributing to a wider movement of communicative polarization and geopolitical deglobalization (D’ Eramo, 2022).

The shift from singular to plural, from top-down to bottom-up processes as well as the high customization of contents is then not necessarily a “positive” or emancipating aspect. As a consequence of the postfordist organization, it represents a problematic transformation of power through a democratizing narrative.

The concept of the “audience” is then useful for critical scholarship insofar as it intertwines concerns around participation and engagement with commodification and exploitation — yet to what extent are we also “beyond” it? How can we think of concepts like participation and power in the context of data capitalism through and beyond the figure of the audience? How can in turn figures like users, participants and communities be thought within the critical tradition of both political economy and cultural studies in a landscape dominated by algorithmic data extraction?

This conference invites contributions studying audiences through the lens of critical media research. The latter questions positivistic paradigms of social research, highlighting issues from commodification and exploitation to resistance and alternative forms of world-building. We look for abstracts thinking through agency, everyday contexts and socializations together with political economy, commodification and value creation. We welcome both theoretical and case studies driven papers and seek contributions in the following indicative topics:

- The audience commodity and its contemporary applications
- The audience as worker in the digital age
- Questioning the term ‘audience’
- Content creators, bloggers and influencers
- Algorithmic audiences
- Datafied audiences
- Generative AI and audience replacement
- Clickification of news and information
- The effectiveness of media literacy in the context of data societies
- Activism, hashtags and platforms
- Audience exploitation
- Mobile audiences
- Media lifeworlds and everydayness
- Film and music audiences
- Data journalism and news audiences
- Social listening and feedback
- Cybernetic audiences
- Audience polarization
- Fans in data-driven contexts
- Streaming audiences
- Audiences in Video on Demand (VOD), Streaming Video on Demand (SVOD) and Over the Top (OTT) Platforms
- Audiences and piracy
- Audiences as publics and communities
- Deepfakes and Gen-Z

Please send an abstract of max 500 words and a short bio at the following address:

conference@medemap.eu

Deadline: September 30, 2025

Organizing board

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(IULM University)

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