Introduction

The academic research on media audiences in Francophone Belgium cuts across the main teaching and research areas in communication science in this part of Belgium: media and journalism, organisational communication, cinema and performing arts, mediation of knowledge, and information and communication sciences and technologies. Audience research is also funded or carried out by non-academic bodies. Within the industry, the Centre d’Information sur les Médias/CIM coordinates the audience measurement surveys and the RTBF (public service television) has its own research department. Other stakeholders include media education associations (e.g. Média Animation, Action Ciné Médias Jeunes) and the Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel/CSA, which is responsible for the regulation of Francophone broadcasting services.

Major research trends

Reviewing the state of the art in audience research necessarily raises the problematic issue of defining the scope of the field. This paper will focus on the major academic research trends during the last five years in Francophone Belgium. Each trend is briefly presented below. We end up with a conclusion.

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1 For a detailed overview of communication research in Belgium, see Puustinen & Akdogan (2008).
2 Due to the limited space available, the research within the industry and certain isolated works (sometimes located outside the media and communication departments or research centres) are not presented here.
1. Reception theory

A group of researchers at the Université de Liège/ULg is working on media and cultural reception using an aesthetic approach. Among them, Servais is drawing on contemporary philosophy (Derrida, Vattimo, Lyotard, Habermas, Arendt, etc.) to articulate media and cultural reception both as a unique experience and as a socio-political phenomenon – she raises questions about, for instance, community membership and participation in the public sphere –, which brings her to develop a theory of mediation and destination (e.g. Servais, 2004). A project scheduled for 2011-2012 will focus on the development of new methods to study reception from an aesthetic point of view.

2. New media and imagined audiences

Several works examine how the designers of communication systems and digital documents (should) imagine their audience. At the Université Catholique de Louvain/UCL, Collard has studied how the designers of technical documents imagine the tasks of aeronautical maintenance technicians (project carried out in 2009 in partnership with Airbus). Currently she is working on modelling the semio-cognitive processes at play when imagining the audience of communication systems. Fastrez, Campion et Collard (2009) have worked on the card sorting method as a means of access to the user’s mental categories in a given field of knowledge. The card sorting method can help the designers to adapt the information architecture to the user’s representations. From a different perspective, the Facultés Universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix/FUND.P have contributed to the FP6 project Multi-modal Interactions Analysis and exploration of Users within a Controlled Environment (MIAUCE) through an analysis of the ethical, legal and sociological aspects of information systems design and European technological policies (e.g. Cornélis et al., 2008).

3. Young people and new media

In 2005-2006, UCL and Média Animation were involved in the project Appropriation of new media by youth (Mediappro) funded by the European Commission (Safer Internet Action
Plan). This study analysed the access to and the use of new media by European young people aged between 12 and 18 years, with a focus on risk perception, learning processes (e.g. media literacy development), parental regulation and social relationships (De Smedt et al., 2006). In 2009, UCL was also a member of the European project Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels, which intended to review media literacy concepts, to integrate them in a unified theoretical framework, and to provide the European Commission with a list of indicators to measure media literacy levels across Europe (Celot, Pérez Tornero, 2009).

In 2005-2007, FUNDP, in partnership with some Flemish universities, were involved in the project Teens and ICT: Risks and Opportunities (TIRO) funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy. Within the perspective offered by the sociology of appropriation, the FUNDP researchers have built up a typology of young users (12-18 years) (e.g. Lobet-Maris, Gallez, 2009) and contributed to COST Action 298 Participation in the broadband society through a study of the generational divide in relation to new media use (Gallez et al., 2010). FUNDP have also conducted interdisciplinary research on the uses of blogs in a variety of contexts such as journalism, political communication and – more topically – juvenile sociability (Klein, 2007).

4. Mobile audiences

Two complementary research projects at the Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis/FUSL focus on mobile audiences. On the one hand, Patriarche et al. (2009) have conducted an exploratory study of the uses of media and ICTs on the move by young adults (25-35 years) who travel to, from, and within Brussels. From a sociological perspective, the authors have pointed out a series of research avenues on the role of daily mobility situations in shaping media and ICT use on the move. On the other hand, some FUSL researchers are contributing to the project Belgians’ Daily Mobility (BELDAM), a public funded national survey that follows up the first one of this kind in 1999 (MOBEL) and aims at providing a vast range of representative statistical data concerning mobility in Belgium.

During the data analysis phase, which is scheduled for 2011, FUSL will focus on the activities carried out during travel times between

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3 Mediappro was a follow-up of Eucarinet 2: A European campaign to raise awareness and implement media education to promote a safer use of the Internet (2002-2004) in which UCL and Média Animation were already involved and which was itself a follow-up of Educaunet 1: Critical education to Internet-related risk management in Europe.

4 The research team is coordinated by the Groupe de Recherche sur les Transports/GRT of the FUNDP.
home and the workplace (or school), as well as on the use of information sources to plan and organise the travels.

5. Cognitive effects of new media

A couple of works mainly based at UCL concern the effects of new media on knowledge acquisition. Fastrez (2005) has investigated the effects of the structure of educational hypermedia systems on knowledge comprehension and organisation. In the same way, Collard (2009) has investigated how metaphors used in the design of educational hypermedia systems influence browsing as well as content comprehension. Campion (e.g. 2006, 2009) is focusing on the cognitive effects of non-linearity in educational hypermedia systems. He is drawing on the theory of possible narratives (Bremond) to study the influence of shadow narratives (i.e. the stories that do not occur, or could have occurred differently) on mental models or storyworlds (Herman) underlying comprehension processes. These experimental studies combine semiotics, pragmatics, narratology and cognitive science.

6. The user as information manager

At ULg, Lejeune (2008) has conducted some ethnographic research on the human voluntary indexers of Open Directory Project. The objective was to shed light on ordinary assessment and indexation practices while taking into account their dynamic and socially negotiated character. At the Université Libre de Bruxelles/ULB, Durieux is comparing two methods of information management in the medical domain, the first one consisting in descriptors assigned by professionals in specialised databases, the other being based on tags ascribed by the users of social bookmarking websites such as Delicious (collaborative tagging) (e.g. Durieux, Kerdelhue, 2009). Depauw (2009, ULB) was interested in the assessment of information quality by information management professionals, asking whether Web 2.0 genres put into question the criteria they use to evaluate the quality of online information sources. This study was grounded on a socio-psychological approach with key concepts such as organisational learning and sensemaking (Weick).
7. E-government and e-democracy

Lobet-Maris and her colleagues (FUNDP) have been working on the e-government ideology and the effects of ICTs on the relations between administrations and citizens, bringing into light the increasing power of the consumerist paradigm (e.g. Lobet-Maris, Terwangne, 2007). At ULB, Breindl and Francq (2008) have questioned the democratic potential of Web 2.0 applications for searching political information and discussing political subjects. Some other works focus more specifically on (online) citizen participation in European public policies. Breindl (ULB) is analysing the use of the Internet by activists struggling to influence European policies in the area of digital rights (freedom of speech, privacy protection and so forth, in digital environments). Dufrasne (FUSL) is interested in the information and communication policies implemented by the European Union, with particular attention to participatory methods intended to reconcile citizens with European issues and institutions (e.g. the online forum Debate Europe; see the research note Online participation of the citizens at the European level submitted to Working Group 2). Dufrasne and Patriarche (FUSL) are also building up a theoretical framework for the study of public participation based on genre theory, using the online consultation on the European Citizens’ Initiative as a case study (see the research note Applying genre theory to (online) public participation submitted to Working Group 2).

Conclusion

On the rather small scale of Francophone Belgium, audience research appears to be scattered: there is a huge diversity of topics, theories and methods – this diversity is in no way limited to the main trends presented in this essay – and little collaboration between universities. The majority of audience studies falls within the category of basic research and there are few externally funded research projects.

Francophone Belgium (especially UCL and ULg) has a strong tradition of scholarly analysis of discourses, narratives and media representations (news, political programmes, literature, cinema, etc.) within a semiotic, pragmatic, aesthetic or narratological perspective. There is no true tradition of empirical reception research as it exists in the Anglophone community. Francophone Belgium is rather interested in the uses and effects of new media (Web 2.0, educational hypermedia, etc.), drawing upon and combining very diverse perspectives (on the
convergences between Anglo-Saxon reception research and the French sociology of ICT uses, see Patriarche, 2008). This is to say that studies of audiences and users in Francophone Belgium indeed put into question the very identity of audience research.

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