Less than some twenty years ago Swedish media researchers – like media researchers all over the western world – could rather conveniently speak of a media audience. To be fair, however, there were a lot of different audience conceptualizations circulating within research by this time. Sometimes the media audience was conceived of as *readers* of newspapers (Weibull 1983). In other studies the audience was rather referred to as radio *listeners* (Åberg 1996). Television was understood to be the dominant medium at this time, and as a consequence the media audience was most often analyzed in terms of television *viewers* (Dahlgren 1995). There were of course also some more fine grained variations within these conceptualizations. Viewers of video movies, for instance, were often referred to as a special category of *viewers* (Dalquist 1998; Bolin 1998).

Depending on analytical tradition these readers, listeners and viewers were looked upon from a number of different points of analytical departure. In some studies members of the media audience was referred to as *citizens* in need of information (Asp 1986). In other, international studies they were mainly understood as *consumers* (Ang 1996), or even commodities for the media companies to sell to their advertisers (Smythe 1977). In still other studies they were understood as potential *victims* of harmful media content, and a great deal of Swedish research efforts were paid to mapping such potential media effects (see Rosengren 1994 for an overview).
Despite the obvious differences inherent in the various views of the members of the audience as readers, listeners or viewers (and in the views of its members as citizens, consumers and/or potential victims), these different conceptualization share an important property. What they have in common is a view of the audience that understands it as a collective of temporally and spatially dispersed –but still coordinated – sets of recipients of centrally produced media. The individuals within the audience were furthermore looked upon as having little – if any – influence over what content they were offered. Still, they were very often ascribed great capabilities to actively (re)interpret whatever media content they came across (cf. Fiske 1989; Lull 1990).

Already during the 1980s and early 1990s, however, developments within media started to make established ideas of the media audience problematic. The adaptation of satellite and cable-TV during the late 1980s (Ilshammar 2002), and the establishment of commercial, Swedish radio in the early 1990s (Hadenius et al. 2008) contributed to a great increase of media supply and – as such – to segmentation of the media audience. In other parts of western Europe a similar development was referred to as “audience fragmentation” or – simply – “the end of the audience” (McQuail 1997).

In the middle of the 1990s, however, the media audience became a somewhat more acute theoretical problem. With the advent and rapid dissemination of digital media in general and the internet in particular the notion of “the audience” seemed to finally have deserved a place on the book shelves of history, and two interrelated issues played key roles in making the notion of “audience” appear obsolete:

1) In terms of technical characteristics digital technology reshape the relationship between the category formerly known as the audience and the media. They converge all media into one and the same digital code, offer interactive features and open up for huge amounts of content for “audiences” to attend to. These features seem to rock the foundation of a traditional view of the audience, that understands it as dispersed but coordinated sets of recipients of centrally produced media.

2) With the rapid dissemination of digital media the notion of “users” grew in popularity at the expense of “audiences”. This is obviously related to the technical development sketched above, but it is also related to convergence between different academic fields. As media
researchers with an interest in the audience – or users – started to pay interest in computer
based media, they also came into conversations with researchers from other academic fields,
notably informatics and Human Computer Interaction (HCI). For all the merits of these
fields, they do not come out of a tradition that pays audience theory and analyses much
attention. Their user- rather than audience-centered approach also seems to have been rubbed
off on media scholars, as the latter have often been quite quick to abandon “the audience” for
the benefit of “users”. This move also holds theoretical consequences as it threatens to leave
knowledge from audience theory and analyses behind, notably knowledge of how media get
interpreted, how we live with media in everyday life, and the importance of understanding
social and cultural contexts of media use.

Despite these transformations, can the notion of an audience really be that easily – and so
quickly – dismissed? Are we not at risk of losing valuable insights by focusing narrowly on
users, who often, in conceptual terms, often seem to hover in some theoretical vacuum,
unconstrained and unshaped by specific socio-cultural contexts?

Our position here is that the digital revolution and the emergence of internet, Web 2.0, and
mobile telephony have – and continue – to dramatically transform the entire media landscape,
obviously enough. However, we also assert that we are find ourselves in a transition or hybrid
epoch, where the one-way communication of “the one to the many”, which typifies
traditional mass communication, certainly remains a major dimension of the contemporary
media sphere. To fully explore the characteristics of today’s media institutions, media outputs
and flows, and all the various forms of usage takes not least into the complex domain of
convergence. Here, however, our argument is more specific: given this still dominant, albeit
convergent dimension of “mass communication”, we ignore it to our peril if we are serious
about grasping the character of prevailing media realities. Moreover, and most pertinent to
our discussion here, the all-too-abstract notion of “user” needs to be anchored or at least set
in relationship to ongoing research about audiences – understood the more or less traditional
sense, but with a keen analytic eye on their evolution in the new media sphere.

To support the validity of this claim, at least in the Swedish context, let us look briefly at just
a few statistics about media access and use in Sweden, comparing data from 1999 and 2009.
These data are available on the Nordicom website – www.nordicom.gu.se (a splendid
resource with data bases and statistics, research overviews, as well as extensive journal- and
Looking at access to different media in 1999 in terms of the population (aged 9-79) as a whole, we find the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily press</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>99 (2001)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television receiver</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multichannel television</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVD-player</td>
<td>7 (2000)</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer in home</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet in home</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile telephone</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yes, there is a small decline in access to a daily newspaper, and certainly if we control for age the differences become a bit more pronounced (for example, in 1999 the figure for daily press for ages 45-60 was 75 percent). Yet overall access to radio and television remains the same, with both multichannel television and DVD – as versions of traditional mass communication – increasing dramatically. So too of course we witness the rise in computers in the home, access to internet in the home, as well as mobile telephones (whose character of course is evolving rapidly towards mini mobile computers with net access).

If access to the various media in this ten year period has this profile, what about actual use? Access can reveal the possible extent of usage; we still want to know the actual usage. Some quick figures about usage on an average day reveal the following percents among 9-79 year-olds in the Swedish population:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morning newspaper</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afternoon newspaper</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television (all forms)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video/DVD</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is a small drop in the use of morning newspapers during this decade – but the evening press remains unchanged. Radio, television, videos/DVD’s all manifest a small decline (proportionately largest in the latter category, though we may suspect that watching films has in reality not declined: at least among the young, we surmise that downloading would account for a good deal of film viewing). We say “decline”, but it is truly relative: the fact remains that two thirds of the population still reads a morning newspaper on an average day, three quarters will still listen to radio, over four fifths still watch television. Net use weighs in at just under two-thirds of the population.

It is apparent that we still need to talk about “audiences”, and to research them, while probing how they are changing in their profile and practices in the new media milieu. To simply focus on aggregates of individual “users” (understood: of the net) as the essence of media usage in today’s media world would give us a very delimited and skewed perspective. We need to “bring back” audiences, not least to chart their metamorphosis in the current phase in the history of social and media development.

References


