0. Audience studies in Italy, as reported by Sorice and Colombo in their essay for COST Action IS0906, are now facing their fourth step, “started in the late 1990s, with many new studies about television audiences and – in the beginning of 2000s – about the form of access and participation in the web 2.0. Italian research has now harnessed a range of skills acquired in the ethnographic field investigation, qualitative methods and social semiotics, where new audiences are reached and explored through a variety of techniques from focus groups to in depth interview, from e-interviews to buzz monitoring”.

A deeper insight in this “fourth step” should analyse two different aspects of audience studies in Italy: (1) firstly, acknowledging the role played by the international debate about audience studies in the second half of the ’90s, and by the Italian translation of some of the main contributions, to their theoretical dimension; (2) secondly, presenting some of the main topics faced by empirical research in the last ten years (2000-2010) by the points of view of (a) the various media and genres taken in account, (b) of the conceptual tools used in the research design, and -probably more relevant for the WG4 this paper is addressed to- (c) of the different social groups considered as audiences.

1. International debate and Italian reception

It could sound a little strange, but the main empirical researches on television audiences undertaken in Italy in the first ’90s (Mancini, 1991; Casetti, ed., 1995) were really groundbreaker also because they were based on a theoretical and methodological frame (the so-called “ethnographic turning-point”) imported from British Audience studies before this frame was deeply and widely diffused in Italian Media studies and scholars; nevertheless, in the second half of the ’90s, when this frame was both institutionalised by a sort of “canonical narrative” and somehow criticized (Livingstone, 1998a; Abercrombie - Longhurst, 1998; Alasuutari, 1999), the Italian academia left out empirical research to focusing on theoretical and methodological questions based on the Audience studies tradition. Just a look to the Italian translations and reception of this tradition could demonstrate a preference for a very

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1 See the paper submitted to COST Action IS0906 by Fausto Colombo and Michele Sorice.
“retrospective” approach: while, on the one hand, none of the main empirical researches included in the Audience studies “canon” (e.g. Morley, 1980; Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985) was ever translated in Italian, on the other hand -also to respond to the need for handbooks on Media and Audience studies connected to the growing of Communications and media faculties and courses in Italian universities- main historical, theoretical and methodological contributions were translated with some years of delay: e.g. Lull (1990) in 2003, Ang (1991) in 1998, Moores (1993) in 1998; Livingstone (1998a and 1998b) both in 2000, together with some very relevant readers (Marinelli - Fatelli, eds., 2000; Andò, ed., 2007), collected essays (Livingstone, 2006) and handbooks (Gillespie, 2005 in 2007). It seems noteworthy that other, following, contributions such as of Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), Alasuutari (1999), Bird (2003), Ito (2008) entered the Italian debate without the mediation of the translation, even if with some delay.

Two consequences of such a “backwards” approach to Audience studies: first, the blank space for a theoretical, methodological and reflexive work on media audiences has been “filled” with a reconstruction and a popularization (Buonanno talks about a sort of “working through”: see Buonanno in Livingstone, 2000) of the Audience studies tradition, letting very little space both for new empirical researches and for an implementation of the debate about Audience studies themselves and their meaning in the Italian media context; it is noteworthy, by this point of view, that one of the few relevant efforts to draw a sort of holistic and original approach to the television spectatorship, addressed to media students, scholars and practitioners, came from some commercial television professionals (di Chio - Parenti, 2003).

Second, we had to wait until the first year of the new millennium to meet a new wave of empirical researches on television audiences and (as a new topic) internet users².

2. Main topics in Italian Audience research

This “new wave” (2000 - 2010) is characterised for some methodological options: first of all, the adoption of the “everyday life” frame as the meaningful context in which media consumption is done; secondly, a preference for qualitative and ethnographic methodologies (focus groups, diaries, interviews, life histories, participant observation, visual ethnography etc.), alongside with an hybrid attempt to use quantitative, audiometric and administrative data from Auditel and Istat; and, thirdly, a gradual orientation towards cross-media / cross-platform audiences, led by the growing relevance of internet as a metamedium.

a) Media and genres Audiences

Nonetheless, a few media (and genres) audiences continue to collect main interest, both from scholars and Institutions: television and internet above all. Just to remind some of the main researches in each of these fields, we can mention -for television- the works of Capecchi (2000) and Giomi (2004) on soap-opera audiences, of Sfardini (2009) on reality show and of Martelli (2010) on sport programs, of Aroldi - Pasquali - Scifo - Vittadini (2008) on early DTT adopters; and -for internet- of Pasquali - Scifo (eds., 2004) on the web users, Tosoni (2004) on MUD users, Mazzoli (ed. 2009) on social networks. Cinema viewers (de Blasio, 2007; Casetti - Fanchi eds., 2006; Fanchi, 2002) and mobile phone users (Scifo, 2005) are other single media-specific audiences investigated; on the other hand, the tendency to study cross-media audiences is well witnessed by Pasquali - Vittadini - Scifo (eds., 2010), focused on cross-media consumption of young Italians, and structured around three main connected topics: the

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² In this paper my attention is more focused on the transformations of “traditional” audience (and the research on it) than on ICTs’ users, best outlined in Vittadini’s paper submitted to COST Action IS0906.
practices of mediated interpersonal communication, the emergence of new production practices and the redefinition of television consumption.

b) Conceptual tools and theoretical frames
By a conceptual point of view, the “everyday frame” of the audiences has been adopted, in some of these researches (for example, in the works undertaken by OssCom researchers on new media such as mobile phone and DTT) on the basis of the Roger Silverstone’s model of “domestication”. Other theoretical frames that oriented most of the empirical audience researches are connected to the debate about “diffused audience” (Abercrombie - Longhurst, 1998), “extended audience” (Couldry, 2005) and “networked publics” (Ito, 2008) as different interpretations of “audience”. By a methodological point of view, new challenges have been posed by internet, the so-called web 2.0 and social media, with their claims for audience participation, sharing, production and collaboration, where internet seems to be, in the same time, a space where audiences become more and more active -to the extent to become producers of new cultural forms- and a new field for researchers and scholars, providing both occasions for “virtual ethnography” and participating observations, and a set of digital tools to investigate “what people do in the Net”. (Monaci - Scifo, 2010). Finally (and obviously), most of the empirical works on soap-operas audience referred to the feminist tradition in Audience studies -a tradition that never had before, in Italian scholarship, a well-established and relevant position.

c) Social groups as audiences
In conclusion, some words about the main social groups that Italian Audience research investigated in this last ten years as peculiar media publics. Some of these are identified on the basis of socio-demo factors, like gender and age: first of all, as mentioned above, women as “natural audience” for some television genres such as soap-operas (Capecchi, 2006); youth, children and kids are another very important category, because of the claim for a so-called “digital generation”, on the one hand, and their “institutionalisation” by educational, commercial and political systems, on the other hand. Some other interesting categories are fans (and fandom), migrants (and their “second generations”) and generations (as cultural identities).

Fans have been investigated on the basis of the whole tradition of fandom studies, from Jenson (1992) and Jenkins (1992) to Sandvoss (2005), by scholars focused on music (Tedeschi, 2003), tv series (Scaglioni, 2006; Andò - Marinelli, 2010, Vellar, 2010), reality show (Sfardini, 2009), subbers’ practices (Vellar, 2009). This focus on fandom is, again, very consistent with the trend to cross-media audiences studies mentioned above because of the very cross-media characteristics of “convergence culture” (Jenkins, 2006).

Migrant communities, coming from different countries and living in Italy, have been investigated to describe their media and cultural “diets” and to know how media contents and languages are used both to sustain integration processes (to learn Italian language, to collect useful and practical information, to share social discourses and so on) and to maintain their own cultural identities (linking people to their own original countries’ media or to the resident community). A peculiar attention is now posed to describe the differences among entertainment and cultural activities attended by first and second generation migrants (Vittadini, 2008).

In the very last years, domestication model has been adopted -in some empirical audience research at OssCom- with a peculiar interest for Silverstone’s notion of “moral economy” of the household, applied -for instance- to the choice between alternative pay DTT subscriptions (Aroldi, Vittadini, 2010) or to the parental mediation in children digital television consumption.
Finally, a generational approach to Audience studies has been attempted, on the basis of some previous works on television audiences in Italy (Aroldi - Colombo eds., 2004; Aroldi - Colombo eds., 2007), by the “Media and Generations” project (http://mediageneration.wordpress.com/), providing a general and theoretical frame to investigate “generations” as social groups with their own cultural identities; to avoid too much “technological deterministic” positions (e.g. “digital natives vs. digital immigrants”), main questions have been whether (and which way) media take part in the construction of generational identities; secondly, whether (and which way) generational belonging affects media usage and sense-making in the everyday practices of media consumption; finally, what are the differences introduced by ICTs in this relation between “media” and “generations”.

References

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