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King of the Hill? Seeking the New in Audience Research

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This article looks at the ways of finding novelty in communication and audience research and questions the necessity to seek constant innovation in conquering new territories in audience research. Based on both personal experiences and those from the PhD students across Europe, the article maps five Basic elements where novelty in audience research is sought—new technologies, new countries, new audiences, interdisciplinarity and cross-media. The article argues that despite the constant pressure to innovate, there are important elements of value in traditional audience research that need to be kept, including methodological diversity and often repeated feel for the triangulation of audiences, producers and text. In this combination of keeping the old and seeking the new in audience research, the discipline can be seen growing richer and more diverse with every added contribution.

As far as metaphors go, being king of the hill, or more likely searching for the hill where one might be king, seems to be the most apt metaphor for any of the academic disciplines. Each researcher needs and wants to find his or her own hill, to establish his or her own expertise, and, preferably, to be recognized as the top of his or her game in that area. Because not all researchers will make it to the top of their respective fields, the notion of finding a hill seems appropriate. So, to a certain extent, this article reflects on struggles faced by the larger academic community to find their place in the academic world and establish a clearly marked position of expertise among peers.

The reflections in this article are based on my experiences (a) in the field of media and communications; (b) on the experience of now hundreds

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of young scholars whom I have been privileged to meet over years of involvement with the European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School; and (c) as a reviewer of conference abstracts, journal articles, and research projects. Coming from a media and communications background, but having found my own hill in audience studies, this text is also a small reflection of my own journey through the process. Audience studies within the media studies framework can be seen as one corner of the territory where we seek our hills. Seemingly trivial—we all have experiences as audiences and hence we feel competent enough to expand our everyday knowledge to academia—yet at the same time, audience studies are exceedingly methodologically rich and rigorous. How does one struggle to find a mark in audience studies so that the new territories discovered would mark significant advances and at the same time, avoid the entrapment as obvious?

ONCE UPON A TIME, ALL SCHOLARS WERE ENCOURAGED TO MAKE THEIR MARK . . . FIND A HILL AND DECLARE IT THEIRS

Academic careers more often than not start with a doctoral degree, and through that work, the positioning of oneself within the boundaries of a discipline, establishing a position. This self-establishment is the first step of the struggle for young scholars, although many more senior scholars also face this challenge. There seems to be a constant need for novelty, for innovation, and to study something that has never been studied before. There seems to be an almost universal need to push the boundaries of communication studies in general and audience studies more specifically so that the discipline remains in constant flux. And this is a challenge not only for the new scholars, who, in increasing numbers, need to make their niches in academia, but also for anyone who writes or publishes anything, as research funders or journal editors seemingly value innovation and novelty to a great extent. While there are many who claim that a good scientist has one new idea and spends the rest of his or her career exploiting it, there is still a need to produce the perception of newness for those outside.

This, in turn, has resulted in overexploitation of the epithet new and innovative, as was demonstrated by Rose Wiles’ presentation in the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) workshop (2012) and the article by Nind, Wiles, Bengry-Howell, and Crow (2012), in which discussion indicates that innovation or newness is seen as a selling point for an article, rather than the need of true out of the box thinking. A similar approach in managing novelty is constantly needed in communication research—how does one argue to the funders that we need yet another audience research project? After all these years, do these communication scholars still not know enough about the audiences to make working claims that hold true universally? The evaluation reports for journals and conferences all demand that
scholars highlight the novelty of their studies, using it as a criterion for justification of acceptance or rejection. And as for the readers, this holds true as well. To see, for the umpteenth time, the uses and gratifications theory applied to Internet research is old and dated. It was heavily criticized when used with the traditional media, why should we care now? However, often the search for the novelty factor is something that makes us to go back to the old theories and old questions and apply them to new mediums or technologies (Yzer & Southwell, 2008) as we seek to find the novelty in marrying the old and new.

The quest for uniqueness and innovation, the need to find your own theoretical or empirical hill, is very much a challenge for early careers. There, the pressure of finding the most appropriate research approach is seen as the determining make-or-break issue. Get the research issue too narrow and the work will be of no interest to anyone, not to funders, conferences, or journals. Get the research issue too broad, and the chances of covering all the aspects in one project, one publication, and remaining credible, may be slim. In fear of biting off pieces of a research challenge that are too large, in many cases, ended up forcing audience studies researchers to ask overly small questions. With the fear of tackling the unmanageable, there is a tendency to narrow down in order to make scientifically valid claims, as the available methods and research usually warrant only the smallest of the generalizations. Thus, each study makes a small hill and describes that often in very rich detail on the map; however, what is lacking is the placement of that ‘hill’ on the ‘mountain range of theories,’ or within the ‘larger atlas of sciences.’

SEEKING YOUR HILL IN A MOUNTAIN RANGE—SOURCE OF INNOVATION IN RESEARCH

In the next section, I will discuss some of the elements of novelty within audience studies. The declaration of newness, the ‘never-been-done-before’ aspect of research, comes with focus on or a combination of many issues. So, where has audience studies found the new in recent times? The following few examples are by no means a full list of this newness, but they do give some ideas.

New Technologies
The onslaught of new technologies has been the saving grace for media and communication researchers since its invention. The newspaper audiences were facing the coming of radio, then television. Television studies have been supported by numerous evolving genres and the new dynamics of
watching as the status and position of television changed. Computers and the Internet have given us diverse possibilities of investigating the different applications and uses of thereof. The advent of interactivity, user-generated content and Web 2.0 has given media studies an enormous new field of research where every single element can be scrutinised to the smallest of details with great results. Study of Second Life made the phenomenon appear larger than life and articles on Second Life user behaviour kept appearing (e.g., see Lin et al., 2012, Matthews et al., 2012; Cote et al., 2012) even after user numbers started dropping.\(^1\) Cote and colleagues note that the decline of user-ship might be a good indication that the earlier phases of experimentation have reached their limit and the use of these technologies is more focused on stable and sustainable applications (2012, p. 22). Similarly, easy access to data on Twitter makes it seemingly one of the most relevant media. The user percentage varies between 0, 1% and 15% in most countries and the difference in the number of user accounts and actual tweeters can be quite significant (statistics on new twitter accounts, 2012).\(^2\) Nevertheless, the new media have provided and will continue to provide a constant stream of innovation to audience studies where the familiar theories and methods can once again be tested in the light of new technologies.

New Countries

While media and audience studies have been very strong in Europe, the United States, and Australia, in many other countries the development of academic scholarship has seen a rise in academic media studies. Thus the liberation from an authoritarian regime, the collapse of Soviet Union in Eastern and Central Europe and the collapse of Yugoslavia in the Balkans has seen a surge in communication and audience studies and the establishment of many new journals (Central European Journal of Communication, the Czech journal Media Studies, Revista Română de Comunicare și Relații Publice, or the Serbian Journal of Communication Management Quarterly—Časopis za Upravljanje Komuniciranjem, to name just a few) and academic networks and conferences (e.g., ECREA Central and East-European Network\(^3\) or Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference CEECOM\(^4\)). In many cases, different political cultures have raised the need to distinguish the local media regime from the international, as in the cases of China (e.g., Yang, 2012, about Chinese new media studies or Li and Tang 2012 about

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\(^2\) http://www.twopblog.com/2012/01/some-statistics-on-new-twitter-accounts.html or http://www.twopblog.com/2012/05/last-100-million-twitter-accounts.html

\(^3\) http://www.ecrea.eu/divisions/network/id/20

\(^4\) http://www.ceedcom2012prague.cz
Chinese communication studies) and Russia (e.g., Matyash 2003). In many other cases, new studies are published because the country and its media sphere are widely unknown and the unique location of the study can simplify the finding of unique selling points. A similar surge in audience studies as well as communication and media regimes in South America, have made it to the map of communication studies in general.

New Audiences

This particular brand of newness helps to bring to light new kinds of audiences. Children, women, the elderly are a few examples of novelty elements in audience research. Contributing to the understanding of these otherwise excluded or forgotten groups has been an important contribution not only to academic knowledge, but also provided support for policy makers. The novelty here can be combined with other dimensions mentioned earlier, thus, as some of the new audiences are especially fond of new media, they contribute to the vast number of studies—for example, children and the Internet and also some specialty journals (e.g., *Children and Media*).

At the same time, new audiences can also be discovered within the area of old media. Here, a particular example of museums as media has recently been increasingly visible. Museum-goers as audiences are studied in different groups and audience studies insights have produced numerous interesting results (e.g., DREAM Research Group or the Museum Communication in the 21st-Century Group).

Interdisciplinarity

This seems almost as loaded a word as innovation itself. There are claims that the field of communication is yet to be stabilised (e.g., Leydesdorff & Probst, 2009), thus there has always been an element of intermingling. The border areas of psychology, political science, sociology to name just a few, have always influenced audience research. However, the possibilities of interdisciplinary studies with fields like geography (e.g., Adams, 2009; Falkheimer & Jansson, 2006) or biotechnology (Scholderer & Frewer, 2003) provide interesting and challenging intersections at which communication can be a vital component. Larry Gross (2011, p. 1497) said, “Communication studies can rightfully claim a central role not only in the basic general education of an informed citizenry, but also in understanding and clarifying many of the central challenges of our rapidly changing world.” While some would debate the need to be central (Peters, 2011), we can still account for

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5 Website of the *Journal of Children and Media*: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rchm20
6 http://www.dream.dk/#/172504
7 http://museum.edicypages.com
the relevance and fruitful intermingling of communication and other disciplines. This gives young scholars yet another avenue down which to find their own hills. However, as van den Besselaar pointed out in one of the recent COST meeting workshops (2012), cross-disciplinarily, especially in team-based research projects is not easy to pull off. Often these collaborations may remain at the feeding-level only, where relevant input is gathered with the help of one group, but coauthoring actually rarely happens. Here, the loss of researcher identity and other such challenges pose serious questions; if research becomes too innovative in the context, it also becomes more difficult to publish.

Cross-Media

Cross-media is yet another extremely relevant concept that provides a holistic approach to media consumption and new challenges for production. To a certain extent, it seems that with discovery of the concept of cross-media, researchers first discovered that the public—audiences—do not consume media content in isolation. We have known of the community building power of the media (Anderson, 1995) and of the interpretive communities of people following the same media (Lindloff, 1988), but cross-media audiences bring the focus of media ecologies (Postman, 2000) or environments onto the media diets of the people. The idea that people get their media content from different platforms and that the use of these platforms could be utilised to the extent that media production should pay attention to the cross-platform movement, is still relatively novel. This holistic approach to media consumption, which goes well with qualitative methods and rich data, promises to give us an even better understanding of what happens to media messages once they are received by people (Schroder, 2011).

The six factors of novelty listed are by no means a definitive list. We only need to look at the latest call for papers from the ICA, ECREA, or other audience or communication studies conferences to see that globalization, social aspects, urbanization, and economic or political crisis are just a few additional challenges that the communication studies and communication scholars are facing. The latest call for papers from the ICA (2012) highlights the fact that the constant reinvention of questions, interests and methods in the field of communication can make us question the ‘tradition’ as such.

THE VALUE OF TRADITION

This constant surge of newness and innovation can also make us appreciate the value of the old audience research. When everything and everyone tends

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8 Full “Call for Papers” is available at http://www.icaahdq.org/conf/2013/2013CFP.pdf
to positively rave about the new and unknown, the old tried and tested theories, methods and research objects provide us with a sense of stability, coherence within the field. Some argue that the constant demand for novelty makes it more difficult to keep to the theoretical and methodological rigour and that in turn may challenge the ethical standards of our research (Nind et al., 2012). The element of innovation also upholds a sense of stability. Meaning that in order to be perceived as innovative and yet grounded firmly in the field of audience studies, one needs to make small changes at a time, keeping some of the work intact in order to be recognised as scholar in one particular field.

For scholars, despite the need for novelty, there are some concepts worth keeping. Here the rich and diverse history of the field—‘tradition,’ if you will—is preserved and successfully applied.

Understanding the Audience, the Producer, and the Text

While many studies within communication studies are fascinated by the whole range of problems across the field, the fascination with the audience receiving the text produced by the producer, the classic trinity of communication research made famous by Stuart Hall in 1980 (Gurevitch & Scannell, 2002), is still very much in the focus. No matter whether we subscribe to Hall or his followers or not. Communication studies is mainly about one, two or all of these elements in some sort of interaction with each other.

Methodological Diversity

The notion of the methodological superiority of quantitative over qualitative research, or vice versa, is long in the past. The innovation that is here to stay is related to methodological diversity—quantitative or qualitative, observation or survey, interview or text analysis. All have their place in the methodological richness of communication and audience studies and while there are still strong supporters in various of these ‘camps,’ the diversity and multi-method approaches are becoming increasingly dominant.

There are of course other things that are worthy of being kept, and the notion of what is traditional, stable, or worthwhile differs across the various subcamps of audience studies. However, in order for the innovation to be recognized as truly innovative, stability, the rootedness within one discipline, needs to be kept. To come back to my original metaphor—we need to know our location within ‘the mountain range’ be able to declare ourselves ‘king of a particular hill.’

Often the young scholars, making their first marks on the academic world, are very good at discovering the ‘hidden or forgotten treasures’ of classic and traditional communication studies. The examples that would fall
under this category are many, but the idea is that there are many wonderful pieces of academic work that have put an old theory or old method to good use and come up with insightful new ideas and inspiring pieces of research. I urge everyone to look at some of the young scholars’ papers in the Researching and Teaching Communication Series where selected young scholars have been given the opportunity to publish their work. These emerging scholars often provide very insightful readings, with a critical approach to old theories shedding new light on communication phenomena (e.g., Bräuer, 2008; Dan, 2011; Jensen, 2009; Ticha, 2010; Turnšek, 2007). These young people make good use of existing theories, bringing new empirical material, new comparisons or a new twist of some other sort to the table. Theirs and much of their peers’ work in looking for their own hill are a good example of the possibility of finding a hill, basing the foundations of the hill on the traditions and theories invented long before, and coming up with new and refreshing ideas about different aspects of communication. This can be regarded as truly innovative, while remaining firmly grounded within the disciplinary boundaries.

BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

A recent editorial in Nature (July 19, 2012) questions the wisdom of political decision making in research funding with the alarming example of the proposed amendment to U.S. National Science Foundation regulations that would stop the funding of political science. The editors proceed to point out that social sciences dealing with human experience in which we all can claim to have firsthand experience at the same time deal with highly complex, adaptive, and not rigorously rule-bound systems that are the most complex. Media and communication studies fall into the category where the research results can at the same time seem exceedingly trivial and not cluttered with the technical jargon perceived as scientific; thus, the conclusions are also understandable to lay people. These seemingly simple results confirm some of the common sense answers as well as prove them false. Many therefore question the existence of a truly scientific paradigm, especially as, in contrast with ‘true science,’ it will take some time within communication science before the first ‘true mountain of the common paradigm’ emerges. Maybe, instead, communication studies will continue to have small hills and clusters of hills. For some scholars, finding their hill—their own original contribution, be it theoretical or methodological—makes it theirs to keep. They will keep adding to it and make great contributions to the future of the scholarship. But for many others, finding one hill, contributing to one research corner, means that they will take the knowledge of finding their hill (and possibly

9 http://www.researchingcommunication.eu
some of that hill) with them when they go and find a new hill, and keep
conquering hills and discovering new uncharted territories. As my colleague
recently wrote in an essay dedicated to future students, working in the area
of science means that she feels like a child in a huge toy shop—there are
always so many options, so many new things to try and so many unique and
new combinations to make (Harro-Loit, 2012). I believe that the discipline of
media and communication science will grow forever richer in our pursuit of
paradigmatic hills and mountains.

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