

## ONLINE AUDIENCE IN DIGITAL MEDIA NETWORK

**Abstract:** *The last few decades have been marked by the expansive development of technology which has reflected on the media world and the opening of new communication platforms. Not only professional communicators no longer lay claim to the production of media content, but also ordinary citizens become increasingly involved in the media sphere as creators. The subject of the paper is the online audience, its role and position both within the frames of conventional, traditional media on the web and social media space. The aim of the research paper is to approach an answer to the question whether new, digital media enable audiences' greater freedom and autonomy in expressing opinions, attitudes and ideas on the web and does it become participatory in the true sense of the word. In addition, the research paper is directed towards contemporary practices of monitoring and tracking the activities of web users, especially on social networks, with the dilemma of whether it is possible to talk about the freedom of network users regarding the constant surveillance of the invisible algorithms which keep collecting and processing information about them.*

**Key words:** *audience, the Internet, participation, datafication, traditional media, social networks*

### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the media sphere has undergone significant changes such as the growth of media channels, the interplay between the media and all relevant social spheres, as well as the establishment of new relations with the audience. Thanks to the development of communication technologies, the manner of reception of media content and the patterns of audience behavior also change, so is the role of watching and listening to the media through different forms of interaction enhanced. By connecting traditional media to the Internet and the occurrence of new media on the web, the audience was given the opportunity to actively participate in content creation, thereby repositioning itself in the media field from the place of a passive consumer of media-produced reality to an interactive and participatory creator role. As a result, audience autonomy has increased in relation to the media-produced versions of the world, and its members given the opportunity to create a world of their own creative products and different contents that offer an alternative view of reality. Although the network has enabled a new quality of communication and interaction unknown and unimaginable to classical mass media, new communication platforms do not have

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to signify the absolute freedom in generating user content. Traditional media sites invite citizens to participate in content creation in public discourse, but at the same time place strict, controlled and rigid boundaries. On the other hand, the users of social media are subject to manipulation thanks to the trend of commercialization. Accessing users' personal data has put social networks into a privileged position and ensured their survival on the media market by trading their interests, needs and personality traits. Their users, unaware of their role in contemporary forms of trade, become slaves to their own selection of preferred concepts. After the introductory part, there are three sections: *The development of the concept of audience – passive, active and participatory audience* – where different interpretations of the audience are investigated in relation to the main social and theoretical processes; *The question of audience autonomy – free or controlled content creators?* – pointing to the role of the audience in the news production on traditional media websites, with a particular emphasis on the practice of commenting and the freedom of participation on the web; *The datafication of society – new forms of manipulating digital media audience* – introduces the reader to the growing trend of monitoring, analyzing and quantifying the activities of media users. The research paper also points to the phenomena of the so-called “echo chambers” or “filtered bubbles” that are associated with the action of personalized and individualized approaches to delivering information.

The subject of the paper is the online audience, its role and position both within the frames of conventional, traditional media on the web and social media space. The aim of the research paper is to approach an answer to the question whether new, digital media enable audiences' greater freedom and autonomy in expressing opinions, attitudes and ideas on the web and does it become participatory in the true sense of the word. In addition, the research paper is directed towards contemporary practices of monitoring and tracking the activities of web users, especially on social networks, with the dilemma of whether it is possible to talk about the freedom of network users regarding the constant surveillance of the invisible algorithms which keep collecting and processing information about them.

## **2. The development of the audience concept – passive, active and participatory audience**

The first researches of the audience were conducted during the period of the development of mass society and mass culture which left a key mark on the conceptualization within the media theory. Totalitarian and fascist movements were the main features of the socio-political scene in the 1920s and 1930s, and their main instruments of power were the media.

The focus on media effects was also influenced by the processes of industrialization and urbanization, which caused a significant change in demographic structure of urban areas and led to the destruction of traditional relations, as well as the social and psychological strongholds of modern man's identity. Completely

disoriented in the new circumstances of life and work, one turns to the media culture which is pulling them into the world of fiction and entertainment, with the help of sweet, seductive and light content, offering the necessary comfort. The audience is then treated as a mass of amorphous, atomized individuals who respond to media content in the same, calculated way. Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst point out that this phase of the audience research is marked by a behavioral paradigm. They indicated the three crucial aspects of the audience specification: the audience is a mass of individuals (negating the importance of belonging to different social groups); the media text is the stimulus to which the audience responds identically (the complexity of the potential meanings of the text is neglected) and the focus is on the function of the media (which is best seen in the propaganda function of the media). The second stage of the audience research was conducted under the paradigm Inclusion/Resistance which introduces the ideology into the research framework. The conflict of imposing the meaning has been taking place in the field of the media, and their origination implies two possibilities: accepting and adhering to the dominant ideology or resisting the leading social attitudes. The main feature of this paradigm is the focus on the text and its meaning. Here, the structure of society is taken as a part of the research concerning the role and influence of the media on the audience, with a particular reference to class, gender and race. The changing nature of the audience and new experiences with the media introduce the researchers into the period defined by the paradigm Spectacle/Performance. The audience is here observed through a double role: the role of consumers and the role of audience members who build their personality and identity based on the media models. The media-promoted culture of narcissism and the universal spectacle influence the construction of the audience (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998).

In an attempt to systematize different approaches to the concept of audience, Stanley J. Baran and Dennis Davis refer to two types of approaches: source dominated theories and active audience theories. The first group of theories analyzes the communication process from the angle of the message source and seeks to answer the question of what the media does to people. The second group of theories deals with the audience affected by the messages from the source and answers the question what people do with the media. Within the study of the media effects, which belongs to the first group, the audience is defined as a mass of individuals with a passive role in the reception of any media content. Thanks to the passive response, without awareness, consent and desire, the audience and its factors are minimized in the communication process: its members are the recipients (Baran & Davis, 2012).

The access to the benefits and satisfaction leads to a redefinition of the audience concept and it conceives the idea of an active audience whose quality and full potential is recognized by critical studies of culture. Recognizable by their critical spirit, cultural studies have evolved as an opponent to the existing dominant paradigm, bringing into question the correctness of the social order and constructed meanings. The primary task of cultural studies is to deconstruct and demystify partial interests upon which a desirable system of values is built and under whose

influence the supposed common sense world view is shaped. Also, it indicates the constructed nature of meaning and difference shaped by an ideology that permeates all activities on a daily basis. The media is perceived as an important, integral part of the hegemonic chain and an important institution of fabricating meaning. Unlike the tradition of effect research, cultural studies in the audience recognize active, creative individuals with the potential of resisting dominant ideologies, ready to give a different meaning to media content and the world. Culture, with its symbolic richness, becomes a battlefield of conflicts and negotiations between different social groups, between those who dominate public communication and discourse and the marginalized, disenfranchised who seek to give meaning to the texts of cultural industry. For theorists and researchers, at the epicenter of interest comes the active audience that can play with the texts of popular culture and find parody, inversion and symbolic resistance in them (Fiske, 2005). While in the centers of media power certain meanings are fabricated and encoded, the audience keeps decoding them actively, in different ways: in the dominant, hegemonic code and negotiated or oppositional code (Hall, 2005).

With the further development of technology and the improvement of communication tools, new platforms of communication are opening, while the role of the audience is changing and its media behavior being enriched thanks to different interactive options. The audience becomes an important factor in the media discourse changing the perspective from which social reality is seen. In addition to being able to critically resonate and reevaluate media texts, the audience can convey their observations from the private sphere into the public by using the options enabled to the media on the web. Most leading traditional media have their own websites whose architectural elements support user interaction. Through comments, they can supplement media stories, offer a different interpretation of an event or open up new topics that are not on the agenda of the official conventional media and serve as an important source of information for journalists. Observing the transformation of the media world, Karol Jakubowicz points out that the new creators of content are getting involved in media communication, creating new forms such as wikis, blogs, social networks, podcasts, etc. According to Jakubowicz, this element of the new media concept is called citizen journalism or user-generated content (Jakubowicz, 2009). Also, Henry Jenkins indicated the participatory culture by connecting its occurrence and development with the explosive development of new communication technologies. In a culture of that kind, the focus is shifted from the concept of distribution to the concept of circulation, which indicates the transformation of the audience as a consumer of constructed messages into new activities such as shaping, sharing, framing and mixing media contents (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013).

New technologies and circumstances of communication introduced the audience into a new sphere where its communication power has obtained a new, incomprehensible dimension even before the occurrence of the Internet. This new audience can be called participatory and occupies the place of an active audience, critically oriented towards media production (Livingstone, 2012). Also, Livingstone

points to the pervasiveness of participation and media in the contemporary living environment. Although it leaves out the possibility that not all citizens may be involved in participatory activities and there are forms of participation that take place outside the media world, the contemporary trend shows that “the audience is becoming more and more participatory, while its forms of participation are becoming more mediated in the media” (Livingstone, 2013: 4).

### **3. The question of audience autonomy – free or controlled content creators?**

While the era of mass communication was dominated by a one-way communication stream managed by social figures from the centers of mass media power, the advent of the Internet has established a model of a two-way information stream whose agents, professional communicators and ordinary citizens are considered to be equal in the communication power. The once restricted communication and dialog space has undergone significant changes thanks to the connection of traditional media to the Internet, as well as the occurrence of new online media. Since there is the expansion of power in the society, audience members with their activities are contributing to the media-shaped reality and endangering the exclusive right of information, that previously belonged to the media and journalists, the public relations sector and other groups of professional communicators (Milojević, 2015). New topics are being opened in the free zone of the virtual space and it is being pointed to the problems previously masked, ignored and excluded from the official agenda of the leading media. While some authors glorify and celebrate the democratic potential of the Internet by recognizing it as a space of free expression of opinions, ideas and attitudes of all citizens, Internet skeptics warn that the control over the information flow is increasing, the manipulation of users’ personal data more present and the censorship of content more evident. Online editions of conventional media, numerous services, portals and communities that gather the audience of different interests and needs call for active participation in shaping the content in the online sphere. Active and creative audience can produce content, comment, re-interpret and share the existing media content online and the main characteristic of online products is that they are never finished products. They are dynamic, fluid creations that can be constantly changed and upgraded, and that do not have a final destination, but circulate between users, sites and devices (Manovich, 2013). The essential characteristic of the text produced on the Internet is the inconstancy, as well as the fact that it can be deleted, reshaped or changed at any time, while the only exception are digital archives of traditional media that represent a digital counterpart of the content from printed editions (Crystal, 2011). Dealing with the connection between contemporary trends in communication and technological advancement, Manovich points to the software role, emphasizing its rule over modern society and the creation of software culture. In a contemporary

mediated society, the importance of media software is growing, defined by Manovich as “programs that enable production and interaction with media objects and the media environment” (Manovich, 2013: 26). Although it does not emphasize the negative side of software culture, but the potentials it brings to the mankind such as handling, creating, sharing and combining media objects, it is evident that software control and management carry themselves the influence and power onto public discourse. The architecture of the leading media sites supports user interaction<sup>3</sup>, but the space it concedes to the user-created content is distinct from the content created by journalists (Hermida, 2011), even spatial positioning of both types of texts, a user text under a journalistic text, is reflecting the hierarchical relationship from the era of mass media communication that the media want to preserve in the digital age. The most often and popular form of participation online, especially on informative websites, is commenting the content of texts (Domingo et al., 2008; Reich, 2011; Weber, 2014). Furthermore, user-generated content is brought into connection with participatory or citizen journalism which reflects the blurred, unclear boundaries between producers and consumers of information, pointing to the fact that journalists and ordinary citizens regulate the media sphere by producing content mutually. However, as Hermida warns, it is a question of pseudo-freedom of citizens, since their activities on informative websites are strictly monitored, while the access to the news production stages<sup>4</sup> unequal, controlled and restricted. The audience most often participates in the interpretative stage, making comments on news within the agenda building, while its access to other stages is minimized (access and observation stage, the stage of media content distribution) or forbidden (selection and filtering stage, the stage of processing and editing content). This situation demonstrates the controlled and guided practice of creating user content that is considered desirable only when there is an established agenda, based on a desirable and accepted social code. The restricted space of expression of citizens and media users reflects their power to participate equally in arranging the information sphere. Their voices, opinions and ideas are marginalized and the publicity they enjoy is far less than the visibility and publicity of journalistic texts (Hermida, 2011). Nico Carpentier also writes about the inability of citizens to influence public discussion and the stream of communication in the online space, but in a more significant manner. In addition, Carpentier makes the difference between access, interactivity and participation in the online space. Invoking the theory of democracy, Carpentier finds the foundation for the concept of participation, where according to the maximalist version participation implies power and participation in decision-making processes. According to the minimalist form of participation, the media control the process, information flow and its outcome, and the result of such processes is the homogenization of the audience whose activities

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<sup>3</sup> Kleut notes that software applications, information architecture, and general interface design influence user interactivity and the degree of control over journalistic content (Kleut, 2011). Since interface design determines user behavior, its activities are known in advance.

<sup>4</sup> One of the classifications of news production has been proposed by Domingo and associates: access/observation, selection/filtering, processing/ editing, distribution and interpretation (Domingo et al., 2008: 333).

are reduced to access and interaction, while participation is depreciated. The media system is directed towards its own demands and desires, by “instrumentalizing and incorporating the activities of participating non-professionals”(Carpentier, 2011: 26). In contrast, there is a maximalist version of participation which, when applied to the media world implies the balance between professional control and audience participation. The result is an increase of participation and the audience which is heterogeneous and diverse, and which becomes involved in political forms of macro-participation (Carpentier, 2011).

#### **4. The datafication of society – new forms of manipulating digital media audience**

In parallel with the influence of traditional media, especially television as a source of information, the Internet is receiving the attention of the audience by offering services that are unfamiliar to the earlier generations of media users. Despite the optimism with which a new dimension of communication provided by the Internet is starting, hegemonic powers, the existing political and economic actors are finding the way of enslaving the online sphere, using it for partial goals and interests. In addition to the legitimate use of online media with the goal of promoting their own ideology and gaining political supporters, political parties are using perfidious methods for collecting personal data of Internet users and social networks<sup>5</sup>. Based on the created databases, mostly without the knowledge and consent of citizens, an individualized access within political campaigns is constructed and the whole machinery functions thanks to digital footprints left by citizens using the Internet for their personal needs and interests. Moving through online space, joining certain groups and using applications require authentic data of users who become the objects of trade in the digital world.

The characteristics of new media are pointed out by Miller, who also writes that their key technological features include: digitality, networking, interactivity, hypertextuality/hypermedia, automation and the existence of a database (Miller, 2010), while the database is defined as a “structured collection of data” (Manovich, 2001: 218). Their digital qualities are related to flexibility and limitless possibilities of finding, selection and data organization. In them, Manovich recognizes the dominant cultural forms which make the basis of any choice of modern man, for example a choice from a catalog, media or database (Manovich, 2001). In contrast to a culture governed by a narrative with the function of establishing order and reflecting linearity while respecting the authority of the author, in the modern age of novels and movies, new technological and cultural conditions led to the emplacement of a database phenomenon without any hierarchy. New circumstances have created a different

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<sup>5</sup> The Cambridge Analytica firm, hired by a presidential candidate Donald Trump in the 2016 election campaign, illegally used the personal data of more than 50 million users of Facebook. Thanks to them, political campaigns had been run in several countries, mostly in the USA, Columbia, Kenya and India - <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/svet-43475183>

world which is being presented as a collection and the establishment of order involves a user who, according to certain parameters, searches and organizes information. The role of the author is being minimized and the user autonomously creates the desired product, namely “databases which allow users to download and recombine existing objects, texts and data in numerous ways” (Miller, 2010: 22). Even though its movements are not more open than in the era of mass communication means when there was not a way to interact and influence media objects, Manovich warns that it is a question of supposed freedom and autonomy, as well as the questionable authenticity of created products. Users of Internet services come across certain elements as being components of the menu among which they can make choices, unaware of the fact that these are already predefined elements. Guided by the illusion that it is their choice to decide and create certain digital elements, users often become marionettes dominated by powerful digital machinery. All routes that users use to navigate through interactive branching systems have already been thoroughly planned, as the author suggests. Similarly, by selecting values from the menu or modifying desktop or applications for themselves, the user automatically participates in “a variable circle of personal wishes and tendencies” previously planned by companies and then incorporated into the software (Manovich, 2001: 124).

From an oasis of democracy to a space filled with millions of applications that access personal information and user intimacy on a daily basis in exchange for free use, the Internet is making radical changes to how it is being used and perceived. Moreover, there is no area of social life that can function without the Internet. New technologies provide greater control to all actors of communication on the Internet. On one hand, media audiences gain more control over the consumption of media content and often include themselves in creating their own content; on the other hand, large corporations make investments into online business in order to gain more control over consumers. According to Livingstone, the current phase of media panic is instigated by new forms of manipulation and exploitation. The author suggests that the source of panic reaction is related to the occurrence of fake news, echo chambers present on social networks, collection of personal data from people online and violation of privacy rights, smartphone and internet addiction, election hacking, etc. (Livingstone, 2018). There is a reutilization of the concept of media audience as a mass of naïve and suggestive individuals who, motivated by available online content, sell the deepest and most private parts of their personality for free.

Digital media deepen the existing gap in the power system even more, leaving the audience on the borders of the communication sphere, where their voices are barely audible. In the database culture, there is a difference between the actors who continually access and use stored personal data of digital media users and the ones who, when caught in a network of supposedly free options and services, become the sources of personal information. (Andrejevic, 2014). This is how the system of datafication and quantification is shaped, but with the help of which the most popular goods become achievable – personal characteristics, tendencies and interests of media users. With the analysis of their activities, motivation profiles susceptible



to trade are created, since owning this type of information enables large companies to personalize access to their users and provide the consumption of their products.

In recent years, social networks have become a central topic of audience researchers since the processes of commercialization have entirely transformed the initial idea of establishing social communities. The present is marked by debates with the focus on the phenomena of the so-called “filtered bubble” (Pariser, 2011) or “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2001) which are established on social networks. Having originated from the practice of directing media users towards information, attitudes and ideas which are in accordance with the existing cognitive schemes, echo chambers are tasked with offering people only what interests them in order to keep them online. Also, algorithms help them personalize the network and completely customize information to each user. The habit of filtering content according to one’s own interests, attitudes and ideas takes the user into an isolated world created by parameters that they have established, and the traces they leave in digital records are exploited by large companies and are subject to universal commercialization. The problematic side of this phenomenon lies in placing an individual into a capsule of ideologically homogenous forms, because their attitudes are shaped according to algorithmically selected information. “Sacrificing” diversity leads into tightness and the interruption of communication with other groups that have different attitudes, beliefs and ideas. Moreover, an individual who is in a “bubble” in which the same kind of message echoes, give their consent to create a world according to their personal wishes, where there is no place for other human beings. Still, with the initial idea of active audience, the theory of benefit and satisfaction was based on the idea that audience members choose media content that will meet their expectations and interests themselves. The emergence of a dimension of media interactivity has further developed this form of behavior of media audience – content that is interesting to users is being requested and withdrawn from the media opus. By using the channels of specific content, people have shared the same frame of reference. However, the popular echo chamber phenomenon differs from previous patterns and the reality it offers implies that the man is alone in the bubble, separated from others and from different choices, perspectives and views. Another important feature of the bubble is invisibility, the third being its impossibility to be avoided online – the algorithm manages the network (Pariser, 2011). The question that online phenomena impose is whether the users have any control over the content they select or does the content control them today? The development of technology has liberated the voices of people from the social marginality so that they can be heard through the reinterpretation of media messages, through commenting or creating different products online, including social networks, forums, blogs, as well as conventional websites of traditional media. However, the longer they are online, and their activities of researching, commenting and producing more intense, digital footprints that people leave can be misused by big companies and search engines.

## 5. Conclusion

Changing the media sphere and enhancing the communication reality with new communication platforms resulted in new forms of audience behavior on the Internet. Its receptive role has undergone transformation which is reflected in the ways of obtaining desired information. The audience itself searches and retrieves information in which it is interested, and the processes of selection of the information sphere bring the audience into a universe of ideas and content created according to each individual. Its repositioning in the media field and public discourse is also reflected in the activities such as commenting, reinterpreting and forwarding media content, as well as the creation of its own products. The “migration” of traditional media into the online space is intended toward attracting the attention of the audience, which is becoming more and more interested in web content and new forms of communication. In order to fulfill expectations and needs of the audience, traditional media find a way of interaction with their audience, open the door to the processes of news production and invite them to participate in the production of social reality. However, some authors (Carpentier 2011; Hermida, 2011) warn that the main segments of news production are limited for the audience and the boundaries of the media agenda rigid and unchangeable. The audience can participate in the interpretive phase when the frameworks of socially acceptable events are established and desirable interpretations channeled through media content.

In such an arrangement of factors, audience interpretation usually takes place in a dominant, hegemonic code (Hall, 2005) and a potential resistance of the audience is recorded in the content of a comment, which, if approved by a moderator, becomes less visible and has little influence on public opinion. As Carpentier points out, audience activities shaped in this way do not indicate the real participation, because the audience of new, digital media is excluded from editing the media agenda, the decision-making process and the shaping of news. On the other hand, its movement through web content is constantly being monitored and every form of interaction recorded and stored in the database of personal information of users. While users sell their personal information for free in order to access the network and applications, trading this data shows significant results in the chain of interested parties. Digital footprints left by the audience online lead into the creation of personal profiles containing personal characteristics, needs and interests. Recycled desires, interests and preferred worldviews come back to users in the form of commercials and media content, drawing them into the world of liked-minded people and making them blind for alternative ideas, different experiences and the richness of different options and lifestyles. Moreover, the propaganda turns them into prisoners of echo chambers and on the basis of their preferences, imposes on the people the same content that can even reach the limits of them losing the awareness about different worlds. Isolation and polarization in the virtual sphere are easily transmitted to real life. Also, web navigation ends with falling into a trap of one's own selection and creating one's own confined world, where every closing of material and symbolic borders leads into

the impoverishment of one's personality and social life, while creating the germ of pathology. Indicating the key issues, manifest and concealed, that the users of new, digital media encounter is only the beginning of a more serious analysis of user experiences so that further observations and research should be pointed in that direction.

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## ONLAJN PUBLIKA U MREŽI DIGITALNIH MEDIJA

**Rezime:** *Poslednje decenije obeležene su ekspanzivnim razvojem tehnologije koji se odrazio na medijski svet i otvaranje novih platformi komuniciranja. Na proizvodnju medijskih sadržaja ne polažu više ekskluzivno pravo profesionalni komunikatori, već se i obični građani u ulozi kreatora sve više uključuju u medijsku sferu. Predmet rada jeste publika na mreži, njena pozicija i uloga kako u okvirima konvencionalnih, tradicionalnih medija na webu, tako i u prostoru društvenih mreža. Rad ima za cilj da se približi odgovoru na pitanje da li novi, digitalni mediji omogućavaju publici veću slobodu i autonomiju u izražavanju mišljenja, stavova i ideja na webu, odnosno da li ona postaje participativna u pravom smislu te reči. Pored toga, rad je usmeren i prema savremenim praksama nadgledanja i praćenja aktivnosti korisnika vebe, posebno društvenih mreža, sa dilemom da li je uopšte moguće govoriti o slobodi korisnika mreže ukoliko su oni pod stalnim nadzorom nevidljivih algoritama koji neprestano prikupljaju i prerađuju informacije o njima.*

**Ključne reči:** *publika, internet, participacija, datafikacija, tradicionalni mediji, društvene mreže*