



Reevaluating Traditional Methods: Challenges of Audience Research in the Era of Fragmented Niche Networks”

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Abstract:

This article critically re-examines the conventional approach to ‘audience research’ in the light of these developments. First, it examines the shift in moving from mass audiences to convergent networked. Second, it reviews the evidence on the measurement gap within current research on audiences. Third, it also examines the evidence on the ‘datafication’ and ‘fragmentation and niche networks’ approach in this regard. Fourth, it reflects on the methodological problems of ‘the convergent media repertoire’ in relation to ‘the audience, changing the current audience research agenda from fragmentation to ‘complex, overlapping networks’.

Hence, the problem of the article is not an epoch of pure fragmentation but an epoch of intricate, transversal, and datafied audience networks with the need for the development of new theoretical models.

Keywords: *Audience, Audience Research, Networks, networked publics, Fragmentation,*

I. INTRODUCTION

Audience fragmentation of spectacular dimensions is a notable phenomenon of the digital media scenario. The broadcast structures of mass media have been eroded in favor of many different platforms, communities, and audiences that have appeared in digital, social, mobile, and web-based media configurations. Yet, the concept of "audience as empire" remains dominant, reflecting the lack of consideration for digital platforms, algorithms, and formats, as well as gaps in the theory of audiences.

However, little research attention has been dedicated to audience research in spite of significant shifts in the audience architecture over the last few years. The conventional audience research paradigms are not explicitly linked with recent audience research in the context of new and existing digital fragmentation; therefore, a re-evaluation of existing concepts and associated research frameworks is called for.

The existing literature and emerging research seem to reveal challenges associated with the existing concepts, which need immediate consideration to ensure the effectiveness of audience research methods in niche audience contexts.

Accordingly, this movement from mass audience to convergent networked publics conjures up a redefining and reenergized approach to publics and the manner in which they are involved and influenced in modern society. Indeed, a robust synthesis of extant literature pertaining to publics reveals not only their convergence in multiple dimensions and from multiple avenues but also their dialogical engagement and capacity to mobilize action at large. This movement and approach toward publics are certainly influential in conceptual theory, calling for an integrated model of publics and their engagement. Moreover, it is also impactful from a methodological perspective, suggesting the employment of mixed methodologies to address relevant themes. This movement toward publics also resonates significantly at a practical level, particularly in terms of inclusive and transparent practice in public engagement and academic publishing. While various literature reviews may support a perspective more aligned to traditional notions of mass audience, it appears that a more robust sampling and synthesis reveal a convergent and networked approach to publics and their engagement.

The rise of digital and networked media has unsettled the conceptual and methodological foundations of audience research. Once grounded in broadcast-era assumptions of large, relatively stable mass audiences, traditional techniques such as ratings analysis, exposure metrics, and text-reception models now confront environments characterized by platform convergence, cross-media circulation, and purportedly fragmented niche publics.

Yet empirical studies increasingly complicate the fragmentation narrative, revealing substantial audience duplication across outlets, persistent reach of mass brands, and context-dependent patterns of differentiation. At the same time, datafication and platformization have shifted power over audience knowledge toward intermediaries, rendering academic and public understanding of audiences more dependent on proprietary metrics and opaque algorithms.

This article critically reevaluates traditional approaches to audience research in light of these developments. First, it traces the transition from mass audiences to convergent networked. Second, it reviews evidence on the measurement gap in recent audience research is a multifaceted issue. Third, it reviews evidence on datafication and fragmentation and niche networks. Fourth, it analyzes methodological challenges posed by convergent media repertoires, including difficulties of defining "the audience," constructing valid audience networks, and integrating qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Finally, it argues for a reorientation of audience research around practices, motives, and media ensembles rather than single platforms or texts, toward a renewed agenda for audience research from fragmentation to complex, overlapping networks.

The article concludes that the problem is less an era of pure fragmentation than one of complex, overlapping, and datafied audience networks, which demand renewed theoretical models and hybrid methodologies.

1. Literature review: From mass audiences to convergent, networked publics:

The transition from mass audiences to convergent networked publics represents a fundamental shift in how publics are formed, engaged, and influenced in the contemporary information environment. Early mass communication theories conceptualized the public as a large, relatively homogeneous audience dispersed across traditional media channels (print, radio, television). In contrast, the convergent networked publics model foregrounds multiple, overlapping publics that cohere around digital networks, platforms, and algorithmically mediated discourse. This shift is driven by advances in information and communication technologies, social media ecosystems, and the collapse of strict channel boundaries, enabling rapid circulation of information and rapid formation of issue-specific publics (and counter-publics) across scales and contexts (Livingstone, 2006).

As a consequence, researchers increasingly examine how publics emerge in online spaces, how discourse is shaped by platform practices, and how engagement translates into public influence and policy outcomes (Guskova, 2022)

In the beginning, the concept of convergent media describes how print, broadcast, and online platforms integrate content and audiences, creating shared spaces where publics circulate, contest, and renegotiate meaning. Guskova’s study of the polemical political discourse in regional Internet space emphasizes how convergence enables mass audiences to engage in dialogue and how social networks mediate controversy and public debate (Guskova, 2022). The wider literature on networked publics argues that publics are now assembled, restructure, and mobilized across digital networks, with audience participation and dialogic engagement playing central roles in political communication and governance (Wagner & Stempfhuber, 2013).

Convergent media environments enable audience members to participate as co-creators, commentators, and organizers in public conversations, often generating online controversies that rapidly scale and cross borders.

The exploration of public communication on SNSs reveals disorderly but generative forms of public discourse where noise, obscurity, and interaction contribute to new modes of public engagement and knowledge creation (Wagner & Stempfhuber, 2013). At the same time, convergence can intensify polarization and strategic manipulation, signaling the need for careful study of platform architectures, algorithmic amplification, and governance mechanisms (Guskova, 2022).

Publics are constituted through networked platforms, not simply by mass reach. The convergence of mass media capabilities with user-generated content and social networks produces publics that are distributed across platforms, times, and geographies. This multiplatform, networked constitution of publics yields multiple publics that may converge, diverge, or compete around public issues, rather than a single mass audience with uniform influence. The regional Internet-space study demonstrates how audiences engage in polemics across networks, highlighting convergent discourse dynamics and the centrality of social networks in shaping political engagement (Guskova, 2022). Related analyses of audience dynamics and public discourse in networked contexts further support this reframing, showing the emergence of interconnected publics beyond traditional channels (Livingstone, 2006).

Convergence fosters dialogic, participatory, and sometimes partisan public activity. Convergent media environments enable audience members to participate as co-creators, commentators, and organizers in public conversations, often generating online controversies that rapidly scale and cross borders. The exploration of public communication on SNSs reveals disorderly but generative forms of public discourse where noise, ambiguity, and interaction contribute to new modes of public engagement and knowledge creation (Wagner & Stempfhuber, 2013). At the same time, convergence can intensify polarization and strategic manipulation, signaling the need for careful study of platform architectures, algorithmic

amplification, and governance mechanisms (Guskova, 2022).

Publics in networked spaces exhibit complex pathways from attention to action analyses of banners, social media discourse, and public communication networks show how online attention, sentiment, and feedback influence public opinion and policy conversations. Early COVID-19 studies illustrate how online and offline public discourse interact within networked environments to shape risk communication and collective behavior, indicating a feedback loop between platforms, publics, and policy responses (Dong et al., 2020). Other studies on organizational health communication networks demonstrate that the structure and density of professional networks influence information sharing with lay publics and policymakers, underscoring the relational nature of networked publics in governance contexts (Hoover & Zephyr, 2020).

Implications for research methods and scholarly publishing The emergence of networked publics intersects with scholarly communication practices themselves. Discussions of author credit, transparency, and publication channels reveal ongoing debates about how to recognize contribution, disseminate findings broadly, and engage diverse publics beyond academia. Baum et al. argue for more transparent and inclusive authorship practices to align credit with actual contribution, which has implications for how scientists participate in and be recognized within convergent publics (Baum et al., 2022). Rouault emphasizes practical guidance for publishing in international journals, highlighting the need to target appropriate journals and adhere to standards such as APA style, which are essential for engagement with both academic and broader publics (Rouault, 2015). Together, these works point to a broader ecosystem in which scholarly publics and public publics intersect.

2. The measurement gap in audience research due to the technological context:

The measurement gap in recent audience research is a multifaceted issue that has been highlighted across various studies. This gap is primarily characterized by a lack of comprehensive methodologies that can adequately capture the evolving nature of audience engagement with media. The gap has significant implications for media development, policy-making, and the integration of media into broader societal debates.

Fragmented digital environments call for reinterpretation. Traditional models of audience research seek to grasp mass communications that transmit information from a sender to a receiver. However, with the advent of social networks and recommendation-based platforms, content choices and consumption have been increasingly shaped by networks of interpersonal influence rather than exposure to content by mass media. Audience researchers have begun to investigate the motivations for media consumption of these platforms; problems arise because they continue to apply concepts, constructs, and hypotheses that were originally formulated within mass-media contexts.

A significant part of the audience-research literature focuses on the Uses-and-Gratifications Theory. This theory posits that individuals employ different channels and content to achieve specific gratifications and subsequently derive either utility or satisfaction from them (Kook Lee, 2009). When viewers choose messages, they base their choice on the reward anticipated from it. Similarly, in fragmented ecosystems, selecting particular platforms, channels, and pieces of content is in accordance with obtaining specific forms of utility or fulfillment rather than the will to maximize audience exposure.

The use of social media and media-sharing platforms in the last decade shows that individuals tend to choose particular networks, channels, and contents in accordance with their needs, thereby they satisfy needs that are by and large peculiar to each ecosystem. The types of gratifications utilized process, even if the gratifications sought would overlap somewhat different media ecosystems and content categories, become subject to further examination. An audience-driven examination of gratifications in different niche ecosystems is still lacking. Filling the void would enable deeper comprehension and research on the audience in networks far fragmented. The measurement gap can take the form of :

2-1-Lack of Comprehensive Methodologies

The field of media development suffers from a significant lack of audience research, which affects project design and policy-making. This gap is partly due to the absence of robust methodologies that can capture the complexities of audience interactions with media content and technologies (Scott & Dietz, 2016).

Traditional methods, such as the "Lecture Recente" for press audience measurement, are seen as outdated. New methods, like automated data collection using mobile technology, are proposed to overcome these limitations (Étienne, 2011).

The impermeability between quantitative audience measurement and qualitative social science research further exacerbates the gap, as there is a lack of integration between these approaches (Bourdon & Méadel, 2008).

2-1-Methodological Innovations and Challenges

The transformation of media consumption patterns necessitates innovative methodologies. The diversification and integration of methods, including the use of Web 2.0 technologies, are essential to address the gap between researchers and the researched (Patriarche et al. 2014).

A mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative paradigms, is advocated for a more holistic understanding of audiences, particularly in the context of distant suffering and media mediation (Huiberts, 2016).

2-2-Emerging Trends and Research Gaps

Comparative audience research highlights the need for cross-national and cross-media studies to develop comprehensive theoretical frameworks. There is a call for more in-depth discussions on methodologies to address emerging themes in audience research (Stehling et al., 2016).

The rapid datafication of society and the rise of new technologies, such as the Internet of Things, present both opportunities and challenges for audience research. There is a need to formulate agendas that prioritize intellectual and systemic issues in the field (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2018).

2-3Contextual and Cultural Considerations

Audience research in specific cultural contexts, such as regional cultural festivals, reveals the importance of understanding audience diversity through multidimensional segmentation. This approach can provide insights into cultural expression and socio-economic development (Kruger & Mgxekwa-Qumba, 2025).

2-4-Viewer-Centered Approaches

The changing nature of media consumption, with the proliferation of screens and platforms, necessitates a viewer-centered approach. This approach focuses on understanding the motives behind media consumption, which can reveal gaps in traditional audience research (Lotz et al., 2025).

While the measurement gap in audience research presents significant challenges, it also offers opportunities for methodological innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration. Addressing this gap requires a concerted effort to integrate diverse methodologies, consider cultural and contextual factors, and adapt to the rapidly changing media landscape. By doing so, researchers can better understand and engage with audiences in meaningful ways.

3-Datafication, Platform Power, and the Loss of Epistemic Control

The datafication of audience behavior—through cookies, app analytics, social metrics,

and algorithmic recommender logs—has transformed both what can be known about audiences and who controls that knowledge. Audience information systems historically centered on ratings providers, but the new environment incorporates digital traces as alternative “currencies” in audience marketplaces (Napoli. 2012).

From this standpoint, ratings analysis can no longer be defined by exposure alone; it must encompass any metric that functions as currency in the exchange between advertisers, media, and platforms. These new currencies (click-throughs, impressions, engagement, watch time) coexist with, integrate into, and sometimes displace traditional ratings, opening opportunities for renewed analytical work but also increasing dependence on proprietary, black-box measures (Livingstone.2018).

Critical scholarship warns that enduring fears of audience gullibility and exploitation can hinder adequate responses to platform power by narrowing attention to manipulation and neglecting audiences’ embeddedness in lifeworlds and public spheres. The circuit of culture model has been proposed as a way to theorize media and algorithmic power by connecting production, representation, consumption, identity, and regulation, thus situating audience data practices within broader social processes of mediatization and datafication (Livingstone.2018).

In practice, datafication introduces both opportunities and blind spots for academic research. On the one hand, passively collected big data promise fine-grained behavioral insights; on the other, access constraints, opaque filtering, and platform-specific biases challenge the validity and comparability of studies, especially in cross-national contexts. This tension becomes particularly acute in work that uses industry-provided usage data to build audience networks or to evaluate fragmentation. (Mangold. & Scharkow.2020). Datafication has some effect on how researchers think methodologically by setting the following aspects:

- Data fragmentation and missing actor links: In fragmented niche networks, actors may be poorly connected in available data sources, leading to unstable or biased network metrics. Methodological work on archaeological and hunter-gatherer networks notes the vulnerability of network metrics to data aggregation, fragmentation, and sampling limitations, stressing stability checks and sensitivity analyses for network structure inferences (Gjesfjeld, 2015). A parallel in contemporary niche contexts is to assess how robust network measures are to partial data, nonresponse, and non-traditional actors (e.g., informal actors, online communities).
- Hyperconnectivity, dynamic platforms, and evolving ties: In the hypercompetitive, dynamic era of social media, niche determinants emerge from interfaces, user trust, and organizational commitments. Studies applying multi-criteria decision analysis and fuzzy/grey approaches indicate that platform interfaces, trust, and commitment are critical determinants; these factors may change rapidly as platforms evolve, demanding longitudinal or repeated cross-sectional data and adaptable analytic frameworks (Huang, 2016).
- Transnational and cross-sectoral networks: Examining transnational social fields and cross-national collaborations reveals complex patterns of mobility, institutional differences, and data heterogeneity. Methodologies such as binational link-tracing sampling illustrate how to map diasporic and transnational networks, but also show substantial challenges in capturing the full scope of ties and ensuring representativeness across contexts (Hâncean et al., 2021). Cross-referencing with cross-national big data collaborations highlights the need for integrating diverse data sources and harmonizing metadata to study niche diffusion across borders (Hu & Zhang, 2017).

4-Constructing Audience Networks and Measuring Fragmentation

Niche audiences surf heterogeneous online environments, simultaneously

expressing diverse identities and building distinct cultural capitals. Within fragmented networks, audience members construct value systems guiding information-seeking and media-engagement acts; these orientations further shape behaviours and signify affiliations. Studies of fragmented ecosystems thus examine how focal groups articulate identity formation, belonging, and habit, as well as the criteria underpinning meta-choices associated with platform selection, content-sharing, and consumption. These factors profoundly affect both individual and aggregate audience-growth trajectories. (Kook Lee, 2009),

Fragmented niches complement and intersect with mass audiences in three ways: the focal group governs collectively desired attributes, governing how media-career value is distributed; platform algorithms dictate promotion levels and operationalization modalities; and rough content-feeding approaches determine positioning in supply-demand chains within the confines of communal goals

In fragmented digital ecosystems, audiences express are empowered to form, reconfigure, and dissolve communities around social, political, and cultural topics. Emblematic of participatory cultures yet subject to uneven agency, community members individually curate and contribute content while collectively negotiating governance rules and discourse norms across platforms including Discord, GitHub, Reddit, Telegram, TikTok, Twitch, and Twitter (e.g., [Link];). Although audience agency remains a pivotal research theme since at least the uses-and-gratifications framework (Kook Lee, 2009), it has not been applied explicitly and systematically to the study of niche audiences. Consequently, adherents of fragmented digital landscapes lack conceptual tools to characterize how independent media creators, traditional media institutions, algorithmically recommended content, and broader social networks shape audience agency.

Three distinct sets of audience metrics arise from the development of various digital formats and platforms (G. Robinson, 2019). These platforms encompass short, long, ephemeral, and persistent content, as well as an array of distribution mechanisms, such as subscriptions, notifications, and recommendations. The three audiences covered are:

- (1) overall platform performance;
- (2) the audience exposed to a specific item;
- (3) the audience choosing to engage with an item through attention-grabbing formats.

Each platform-specific metric reflects different audience definitions yet may intersect. Because only the first audience is commonly measured, the second and third remain hypothetical and unexamined. Whereas overall performance and initial reach are therefore considered necessary, additional exposure and engagement metrics too may be useful in identifying fragmented networks and distinguishing between content calibrated for mass or niche exposure.

Network analysis has become a prominent way to model audience behavior, using audience duplication (shared users between outlets) to infer structures of co-exposure and fragmentation (Webster, et al. 2012). However, methodological decisions in network construction can profoundly alter interpretations.

Simulation studies of audience networks built from multi-country survey data show that different filtering procedures—such as traditional deviation-from-random-duplication filters versus backbone extraction—produce markedly different network structures and implications about fragmentation. Backbone extraction, for instance, may best handle randomness in use data but yields networks that diverge strongly from those derived using older methods, raising questions about comparability across studies and over time. (Mangold et al, 2020).

Such findings underscore that fragmentation is partly an artefact of analytical choices, not simply an empirical property of audiences. This complicates sweeping claims about a new era of niche publics and spotlights the need for transparent, standardized measures, especially in cross-national comparisons (Mangold et al, 2020).

a- Bridging the Qualitative–Quantitative Divide

Traditional audience research has often been polarized between quantitative exposure metrics and qualitative interpretive work. Yet contemporary convergent and networked audiences demand approaches that can address both large-scale patterns and lived, contextual experience.

Critical overviews in arts and performance studies argue for multi-perspectival, mixed-method designs that combine surveys, observation, interviews, bioscientific measures, and other tools to capture the value and impact of audience experience (Walmsley, 2019). Similarly, discussions of convergent audiences highlight how neither purely qualitative nor purely quantitative approaches can alone capture complex, multi-platform usage, advocating for triangulated designs (Bakulev et al, 2021).

Q methodology has been reintroduced as a particularly promising hybrid technique, offering structured, factor-analytic insight into audience subjectivities while retaining qualitative depth in interpreting different audience “types” or viewpoints (Davis, 2011). It enables researchers to map varieties of audience experience and test conceptual models before moving to large-scale surveys, and recent software developments facilitate online administration across diverse media users. (Davis, 2011).

These efforts illustrate a broader trend: rather than abandoning traditional methods, scholars seek to retool and recombine them to address fragmented, datafied environments.

b- Redefining “The Audience” Under Convergence

Practical challenges also arise in defining and sampling “the audience” when boundaries between audiences, users, and producers blur. Reviews of mass media audience research note ongoing difficulties in delineating audiences across traditional and new media, limited research skills and expertise, and problems in obtaining reliable statistical data (Maryam, et al, 2024).

Proposals to focus on individual “media repertoires” and “uses genres” attempt to navigate this by organizing analysis around patterns of practice—how specific technologies, content types, and everyday situations cluster—rather than around isolated platforms or demographics (Bakulev et al, 2021). This approach accommodates convergent behaviors and also highlights how small or peripheral markets may exhibit distinct audience practices shaped by language, localization, and industry structure. (Macek, 2020).

Alternative conceptual frameworks, such as the notion of news reading publics, similarly seek to theorize fragmentation beyond Western contexts, using network analysis to identify publics that may cut across traditional categories and offering a more global, socio-political model of how audiences assemble online. Such work challenges the universal applicability of conceptual models derived from advanced democracies and underscores the need for comparative, context-sensitive theories.

5-Toward a Renewed Agenda for Audience Research From Fragmentation to Complex, Overlapping Networks

Empirical evidence suggests that the high-choice, networked media environment is marked less by neatly separated niches than by complex, overlapping attention patterns. Audience duplication remains high across television channels, news platforms, websites, and social networks, even as individual-level factors and trust relations shape more subtle forms of differentiation (Webster et al, 2012)

Accordingly, the core challenge for contemporary audience research is not simply to document fragmentation but to model how and why audiences overlap, diverge, and recombine across contexts, time, and issues. Network analysis, when carefully designed and transparently filtered, offers powerful tools, but must be paired with qualitative and interpretive work that can explain the social meanings and motives underlying observed structures (Bakulev et al, 2021). The researcher’s mechanisms involve :

5-1-Re- centring Practices, Motives, and Lifeworlds

A growing body of work proposes re- centring research on practices, motives, and lifeworld contexts rather than on isolated texts or devices (Walmsley, 2019). Motive- centred analyses of watching, for example, reveal enduring patterns—such as seeking relaxation, information, or connection—that cut across platforms and formats, while exposing under- researched forms of engagement. Media repertoire and uses- genres approaches articulate how convergent audiences assemble personalized ensembles that link technological objects, content types, and everyday routines (Macek, 2020).

Such frameworks resonate with broader shifts toward seeing audiences as active participants in mediatized, datafied societies, embedded in circuits of production, regulation, and citizenship. They also open space for more ethically attuned research that considers not only what audiences do, but how their practices intersect with questions of power, inequality, and governance (Walmsley, 2019).

5-2-Tools and methods that support robust analysis in fragmented niches

Net-Map and frontline governance mapping: Net-Map provides a practical approach to mapping actors and influence in sustainability transitions, combining interviews and visual mapping to facilitate discussion and shared understanding among diverse stakeholders. This tool is particularly relevant for civil-society–driven niches where formal records may be sparse, and stakeholder reconciliation is necessary (Metelerkamp et al, 2020)

Hyperlink network analysis for online niche communities: The study of climate policy supporters/opponents via hyperlink networks demonstrates how online link structures can reveal support coalitions and information flows. This approach is relevant for fragmented online niche networks (e.g., social media communities around niche technologies or governance innovations), offering a method to map information diffusion and identify pivotal nodes in online ecosystems (Wang, 2025)

Bi-national sampling and transnational network design: For niche phenomena with cross-border relevance (e.g., global grassroots finance, transnational NGO networks), binational link-tracing and cross-national collaboration analyses provide design templates for sampling, network construction, and interpretation of cross-border diffusion patterns (Hu & Zhang, 2017)

Systematic reviews and bibliometric mappings to establish a research-ahead framework: Bibliometric analyses of strategic niche management and niche-related research streams help researchers position their work within evolving intellectual terrains, identify gaps, and select appropriate indicators for niche diffusion and learning processes(Ding et al. 2021). This supports transparent methodology and replicability.

5-3-Engaging Critically with Datafication and Platform Metrics

Finally, reevaluating traditional methods in the era of fragmented niche networks requires sustained critical engagement with data infrastructures. Ratings and exposure metrics are now only one part of complex “currencies” that include engagement, algorithmic recommendation, and behavioral traces . Access to, and interpretation of, these metrics are shaped by platform interests, raising issues of transparency, accountability, and

epistemic dependence for academic research. (Mangoldet al,2020).

A next- generation research agenda thus involves:

- Conceptual work revisiting what counts as an audience measure and how different currencies encode power (Livingstone, 2018);
- Methodological innovation in integrating platform data with surveys, ethnography, and experimental designs (Bakulev et al, 2021);
- Comparative studies that expand beyond Western contexts to capture diverse modes of fragmentation and public formation (Macek, 2020);
- Reflexive attention to how methodological choices (e.g., network filters, sampling frames) shape findings about fragmentation and niche networks (Mangoldet al,2020).

6-Conclusion:

Recent developments in the audience structure have altered considerably, but audience studies themselves have garnered extremely little scholarly attention. The ways of approaching audience studies have traditionally not been seen as an extension of the modern fragmented digital environment, making it an urgent task to reconsider the audience concept and the methodological frameworks accompanying it. While assessing the literature and studies, the fundamental conceptual concerns that need to be addressed to aid the development of audience studies in the niche environment come into focus.

Audience research was invented in and for the broadcast era, yet the fundamental concerns it addressed in relation to the processes of sense-making, participation, and the management of shared attention remain integral to the functioning of the convergent and datafied media landscapes that have come to characterise the modern media world. While the traditional approach may be seen to be in decline, it is also being reframed within the context of increasingly networked and 'niche-inflected' ecologies, powerful platform actors, and diverse global publics. To effectively respond to these dynamics, however, traditional audience research must transcend simplistic discourses of fragmentation, hybridity, and practice in addressing the metrics and infrastructures through which the concept of the audience comes to be represented and accounted for.

Thus, the trajectory of the field reveals an initial promise of theoretical convergence stymied by implementation difficulties, with the various traditions differentially poised for relevance to the present based on the underlying assumptions about audience activities, text stability, and interpretation. Rather than a unifying paradigm, audience studies developed as a set of specialized approaches to particular circumstances: uses and gratifications for individualized platform preference, cultural studies for interpretive communities and resistance, reception studies for cross-platform meaning-making. Thus, the notion of a crossroads reflects an understanding that a unifying conception of the audience was not adequately capturing the differentiation of audiences on platforms, cultures, or practices.

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