

Televisual Leisure Experiences of Different Generations of Basque Speakers

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ABSTRACT

In this research project I argue that the connection between Leisure Studies and Audience Studies is unavoidable, fundamental and fertile in its possibilities, as media are becoming increasingly significant in defining the leisure of the 21st century citizens of affluent societies. Audience Studies have focused on the quantitative analysis of media consumption, while research practices traditionally associated with Leisure Studies such as time budgets have tended to measure observable activities overlooking the meanings given to and taken from those same practices [10].

This project is innovative in stressing the need of a new model for audience analysis that blends the polysemic nature of the terms *leisure* and *television*, especially in a transforming media landscape. It is argued that adapting the concept of leisure experience to the field of TV audiences is key for a better understanding of the present and future forms of television. This paper presents the justification and the relevance of the issue at hand, the broad theoretical concepts on which is based, the thesis' aim, scope and objectives and a brief note about its methodology and proposed case study with Basque speakers, still in a preliminary stage of definition, as well as the provisional index of the study.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.2. [User Interfaces] - Evaluation/methodology.

General Terms

Human Factors, Measurement, Performance.

Keywords

Audience Studies, Leisure Studies, Television, Experience, Media Ecosystem, Basque speakers.

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1. JUSTIFICATION

Media related leisure has gained increasing psychological, sociological and economic weight in industrialized societies to such degree that it can be argued that entertainment and media have become inseparable concepts for the majority of the citizens of affluent societies [3]. Today it becomes increasingly difficult to portray the leisure of a 21st century citizen without considering the media texts (written, audiovisual, digital, analog...) that he/she consumes and participates in.

Mass media have become meaningful elements in the everyday life of individuals and communities alike in postindustrial and developing countries. Citizens' everyday spaces —sitting and sleeping rooms, class rooms, cultural centers, pubs, vehicles— and daily times -routines, habits, frequencies, periods—are saturated with media texts. Individuals of developed countries spend most of their free time watching television, listening to the radio, surfing the internet, playing on the console. Media have become omnipresent, and they have done it especially through leisure. Today, it is unavoidable to study leisure when considering media as well as studying media when considering leisure [10].

Television provides a fertile empirical and conceptual starting point for a joint exploration of the leisure experiences of media audiences. Studying TV and its audiences from the perspective of Leisure Studies is justified both because of the massive aggregate time that is destined to it in and because of its contested but not still overthrown centrality in a rapidly changing digital media landscape. Both present and future TV are critical for Leisure Studies.

Traditional audience research methods have been mostly interested in counting and weighing the time we spend in front of the screen and trying to measure the effects and range of media in their audiences, but so far they haven't provided us with answers to questions such as how and why do we insert television in our dailyness, what meanings does TV take into people's everyday life or which pleasures do we find in our relations with it.

Leisure and Audience Studies can no longer avoid these challenges. Not only because media have become, along with tourism, major social manifestations of leisure in contemporary societies, but also because they are the objects of human choice and the specific articulations of human freedom.

My PhD thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the choices behind audience figures analyzing the meanings that people build in relation to television and the roles that TV plays in their everyday life. A model for the analysis of audience's audiovisual leisure experiences will be presented for that purpose.

2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The term *television*, far from a unique meaning traditionally associated to it, refers to multiple realities: a household electronic device, a social institution, a content production and distribution system, a leisure resource, a leisure practice, an industry, a market and so on. Alain Le Diberder and Nathalie Coste-Cerdan [2] refer to it as an unknown social object, our society's "immense and central object, which, unable to avoid, we stop perceiving, like the totem, expressing and concentrating all the hopes and fears of the modern tribe" (1990: 12).

TV in its more traditional as well as most interactive and crossmedia forms is, in Javier Callejo's words [1], a media of multiple identities which accumulates socially represented attributes, such as of that of the audience who represents itself in front of the TV set. Beyond the specific devices and their technical specifications, my thesis is concerned with the concept of television that people constructs in their everyday relations with it: how do they watch, read, understand, love, hate, take into consideration and reject TV in their everyday lives. The object of study of this thesis is the television able to enable or make impossible, facilitate or prevent, limit or condition leisure experiences in relation to it.

Interestingly, the concept of leisure shares its polysemic nature with that of television, to the point that it is difficult to determine what it is and what it is not leisure. Despite the rich and colorful development of interdisciplinary Leisure Studies during the 20th century, especially in the decade of 1990, a conclusive and universal definition of leisure remains elusive. Although leisure theorists adventure different definitions like the one proposed by Robert Stebbins "Leisure may be defined as: uncoerced activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both), use their abilities and resources to succeed at this" [15], or the one by the Institute of Leisure Studies, "Broadly, Leisure comprises freely chosen experiences and actions, carried out in areas of freedom, without primarily utilitarian objectives, and which report satisfaction to the individual." [11], it is also generally accepted John Neulinger's proposition that "Perhaps it is best to realize that there is no answer to this question, or better, that there is no correct answer" [12].

Furthermore, as Leisure can be studied from different paradigms, each perspective tends to highlight certain characteristics, while overshadowing others. Indeed, a too simplistic definition becomes problematic when confronted with

the nuances of everyday human experience. Traditionally understood in terms of opposition with work—"leisure as rest and recuperation from work" or "as an antidote to the stresses and strains of modern life" [7]—the concept of leisure has undergone continuous transformations through history, and has reached a relative conceptual and theoretical emancipation, possibly induced by its explosively growing social relevance. "Considered, until very recently to be a danger or a secondary matter, today it is understood as a field of development, identification and a right" [4]

On the one hand, from an objective point of view leisure has to do with the available free time, with the time period spend on doing something, with the resources used and the related actions [4]. It refers to the employed materials, occupied spaces, repeating habits and practices that are carried out. On the other hand, a subjective standpoint gives more relevance to the satisfaction, pleasures and meanings that can arise from the experience. Leisure is an area of human experience which is searched for and composed of freely chosen pleasant activities, but its outcome will never be entirely dependent on the action itself, neither on the subject's free time, economic or education level by themselves.

As long as leisure is a personal experience, at the same time individual and social, it cannot be understood as a completely subjective phenomenon because a person's life always will be situated in a specific social and material context. For the Humanist Leisure Perspective of the Leisure Studies Institute of the University of Deusto, leisure is, at the same time, a social phenomenon, an integral personal experience, and a basic human right. This threefold meaning has been explored by the author in relation to the television in his dissertation [9] and represents the theoretical starting point of the current PhD thesis.

Marie Gillespie states that, "The media are cultural institutions that trade in symbols, stories and meanings. As such they shape the forms of knowledge and ignorance, values and beliefs that circulate in society" [6]. It is this trade in meanings, stories and symbols that constitutes the core of their social relevance as manifestations and enablers of leisure, which this thesis aims at exploring. The meanings of television and leisure are not fixed, but change along history and through human groups and individuals.

Exploring the everyday connections that different generations of Basque speakers make between TV and leisure will be one of the keys elements to understand their conceptions of what place does television have in their lives and to understand the evolution of these two terms, charged with multiple meanings. Comparing the discourse of different age-groups, showing different levels of media literacy and expertise with information and communication technologies (ICTs) will help us to clarify the possibilities and manifestations of social and individual interaction with television.

3. SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

This research project aims at contributing to the Audience Studies with an analysis of the leisure experiences of different generations of Basque speakers that goes beyond the counting of time and the analysis of the textual content of the medium. I attempt to explore television consumption not as a leisure practice, but as a complex, multi dimensional leisure experience. The preliminary objectives and working hypotheses are introduced below:

Main objective: To explore the leisure experiences of different generations of Basque speakers in their relationships with a television in transition.

Secondary objectives:

O1: To explore the contributions of the Humanist Leisure perspective to the Audience Studies and vice versa .

O2: To analyze the discourse of participating subjects in relation to their attitudes, emotions and feelings in the use of television in their everyday lives.

O3: To identify and compare the key structuring elements of various age-groups' relation with television and their conception of it.

O4: To introduce a model for audience analysis that takes television as a framework for leisure experiences, beyond the perspective of leisure practice.

This project is based on the following working hypotheses:

- i. Different people establish and develop different relationships with TV. Television viewers show different skills, goals, strategies and usages of TV, and they result in different experiences, including those of leisure.
- ii. Both media and the way audiences engage with media are changing profoundly. Different generations have had different contacts with media that result in distinct expertise developments, which lead to different ways of engaging with media.
- iii. The skills, goals, strategies and usages employed in TV consumption are different between age-groups, due to, among other factors, the difference in expertise with information and communication technologies, media literacy levels and personal and social agendas.
- iv. These relationships are complex and varied and are not exhausted by quantitative audience measurements.
- v. TV-related leisure experiences do not necessarily start when switching on the TV set and do not end when it is switched off either.
- vi. The experience of the subject of media leisure can be known through the analysis of her/his discourse.

Given that "Television does not mean what it once did" [14], we must follow that neither does the study of its audiences. While time and space have been the main parameters in the past century, but XXIst century Audience Studies must deepen in the leisure experience of individuals and communities.

This is the concern that the present project has been initiated with, and the main contribution that it aims to make: to understand and to provide a model to approach television as an enabling, limiting, conditioning and changing reality of leisure experiences.

4. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this thesis is not to study the times and spaces Basque speakers watch TV (when, where, how much, how many times...) the contents they consume (what, how, through which channels...), or to generalize trends in Basque audiences, but to collect the audiences' discourses in order to compare and understand their leisure experiences.

The methodological ambition of the thesis is one of understanding, not of totality [16]. The in-depth case study of different generations of basque speakers will provide a "detailed examination of a single example" that "can be used in the preliminary stages of an investigation to generate hypotheses" but not limited to it [5]. This approach will enable a necessarily incomplete but intensive exploration of the meanings and pleasures found and built around television, following the ethnographic statement declaring that "experience shows that intensive study provides understanding, while extensive doesn't" [8].

The nature and complexity of the phenomenon of human experience requires a qualitative approach for its understanding. In the terms used by Chris Rojek [13], what is needed here is more an ideographic approach than a nomothetic approach: a non-generalizing methodology, more than a generalizing one. My interest lies in the construction of meaning and in the living of meaningful recreation, entertainment and leisure experiences. Therefore the object of study can only be approached through the narration of these experiences, as it only occurs within the person, never outside it. The importance, meaning and significance that the audiences grant to television can only be known through their own expression.

The working language of this PhD thesis is Basque. The text itself will be written in Basque and in English, and the fieldwork (interviews and focus groups) will also be naturally conducted in Basque, although English, Spanish and French will also be employed when indispensable in order to clarify important aspects of the case study to the participants (especially in the case of migrant Basque speakers abroad).

The techniques chosen for the collection of data through the case study will be the in-depth interview and the focus group (both homogeneous and heterogeneous in their composition regarding age-groups). Two pilot focus groups have been completed to this stage, one in Spanish and another one in Basque, which have helped pretest the interview and group-discussion scripts and to determine their limits and reach regarding the objectives proposed.

5. PROVISIONAL INDEX OF THE THESIS

This PhD thesis will have three distinct parts:

Section 1: Theoretical framework

Chapter 1: Leisure and leisure experience
Chapter 2: Television and audience studies
Chapter 3: The media ecosystem

Section 2: Analysis of the experiences of the audience

Chapter 4: Methodology of fieldwork
Chapter 5: Analysis and results of the Case Study
Chapter 6: Comparison and typology of leisure experiences

Section 3: The audience analysis model

Chapter 7: The audience analysis model
Chapter 8: Conclusions and recommendations

At this point in time the index of the thesis is in a provisional state, as the author is in the process of drafting the theoretical section. The methodology of the fieldwork and the definition of the Case Study will be nurtured with the contributions of the present conference and redefined during in a predoctoral stay in during 2011.

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