Chapter VII
Audience Participation in Television and Internet: Attitudes and Practices of Young People in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to evaluate the attitudes and practices of media participation amongst young Portuguese aged between 12-18 years, with a particular focus on content creation and sharing through media and information and communication technologies (ICT). Audience participation in television and internet will be addressed, having as basis the results and findings of three empirical studies integrated in the PhD research project of the author, namely: an ethnographical study about the usage of media and ICT usage by 10 families conducted at their own domestic contexts, a quantitative survey about the usage of media and ICT by young people aged 12-18 with a total of 962 respondents and, finally, an evaluation study of a participatory media format which was tested and evaluated by 77 teenagers from three different schools. The main objective is to better understand the attitudes and behaviors of young people in Portugal towards the practices of creation and sharing digital content through media and ICT, providing empirical data about the range and frequency of experiences of content creation by this specific population, as well as their interest and adherence to participatory media formats.
INTRODUCTION

The issue of audience participation has been gaining increasing relevance, not only for the academia and public institutions, but also for the media and communication industries. Nevertheless, even if media and ICT are potentially enablers of such practices, what is the scope and range of participation practices amongst people in their everyday life? More specifically, what is the audiences’ actual interest, skills and experience in creating content as well as sharing it? Compared with research on access and understanding, we know very little about the creation of messages or content among the audiences (Livingstone, Van Couvering, & Thumin, 2005).

The evaluation of media participation interest and practices amongst young Portuguese people aged 12 to 18 was one of the nuclear questions explored on the PhD thesis *Audiences 12 to 18 years old in the media convergence context in Portugal: the emergence of a participatory culture* (Quico, 2008) in Communication Sciences at Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal. The thesis’ main objective was to identify the main uses of media and ICT by young people aged 12-18 in the current media convergence context in Portugal, more specifically, to evaluate the incidence and relevance of creating and sharing digital content among this specific population and their interest and actual practices of media participation.

The theoretical framework of this research work has its foundations on the Audience Studies field, more specifically, it follows the general orientation of Reception Studies and Cultural Studies that consider audiences as active producers of meaning, as well as the notion that audiences are producers of cultural artifacts which derives from media fan cultures research led by scholars such as Henry Jenkins (1992; 2006a). Instead of asking what media do to people, this research project asked what people do with media: how they use media, how they incorporate media, what functions media have in their everyday life, and what degree of importance is given to media. This research is therefore guided by the conceptualization of audiences as active producers of meaning and cultural artifacts, initially proposed by the Uses & Gratifications approach, Cultural Studies and Reception Studies. Also, Jenkins’ definition of participatory culture (1992; 2003; 2006b) is used in contrast with the notion of passive media audiences and also as a tool to explore the complex relations between media producers and consumers occurring in the current convergence context.

The research design of the thesis is based on interdisciplinary approach, drawing on quantitative and qualitative methods in order to gain a diversity of perspectives about the subject under study. The multi-perspective and multi-dimensional forms of comprehension of a given situation are defended by David Morley (2007) who advocates in favour of data triangulation as an alternative to adopt a sole methodology, since the combination of different methods such as interviews, daily diaries and ethnographical studies will allow to compare what people say with what they really do (pp. 82-84).

Likewise, Sonia Livingstone et al. (2005) state that in Media Studies and Audience Studies fields the broad trend is towards the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods and a pragmatic multidisciplinarity, with the objective of overcome or compensate the disadvantages of certain methods over others (p. 57). For instance, most surveys are supported on the self-evaluation of attitudes and practices, while qualitative methods such as ethnographical studies even if they allow a deep comprehension of certain subjects, as well as provide context for the findings, they sacrifice the advantages of surveys in terms of the diversity and representativeness of the population surveyed. This way, the best practice in the research methods seek to integrate useful and efficient methods from several sources into a multi-method research design, instead of being directed by specific theories or disciplines (Livingstone et al., 2005).
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