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# Engaging with Media in a Fragmented Media Environment

Riitta Perälä

#### 1. Introduction

Media are increasingly fragmenting and boundaries between genres are blurring. Users nowadays have access to the same content on different platforms and they are using media in new ways. Personal media portfolios now contain dozens, even over a hundred media titles. Thus there is a need to understand the whole scope of user and reader media landscapes, not just one medium or genre. This chapter is a part of a PhD thesis that focuses on how people engage with media – especially with magazines – in a fragmented cross-media environment. The aim is to reach a better understanding of media engagement through empirical data.

Media fragmentation has in recent years inspired many researchers to conduct cross-media research from various viewpoints (see Schrøder, 2011, p. 8). The interest in media portfolios or media repertoires has increased as the fragmentation of audience attention has increased. Both media companies and academic audience researchers have been keen to discover the interrelations between different media and content (see e.g. Hasebrink/Domeyer, 2012; Schrøder, 2011). I prefer to use the concept of personal media landscape, which covers one participant's entire media use, and also allows the users to define what they actually mean by 'media'. In using the term 'media title' I mean specific titles, e.g. specific magazine titles, blogs or TV series.

The importance of media use and the motivation for choosing specific media titles are interwoven with a number of issues, e.g. personal routines, social interaction and practices, a need for relaxation, and the attempt to find material related to topics of interest. Motivations are not static; they change from time to time and new ones occur, and therefore personal media landscapes are in constant change. Media use is not a separate part of people's lives. It needs to be considered and examined as a part of everyday culture and daily life (Bird, 2003, p. 3).

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## 2. Context: cross-media research and magazines

Exploring the more individualistic and culture oriented relationship between media and their audiences began to interest researchers during the 1980s, after a long period of mass media research focused more on media effects. Popular media products, such as women's magazines and television series, were explored (see e.g. Barker, 2012, p. 61). The 'ethnographic turn' took place later when researchers felt the need to contextualise media use within the surrounding culture (Bird, 2003, p. 5) and when audiences themselves were allowed to define how, when and why they use media. The idea of 'active audiences' emerged within the field of cultural and audience studies, as did practice theory with its emphasis on media anthropology (Postill, 2010, p. 3). Interest in practices can be seen as a counterbalance to text-driven audience research (Couldry, 2010, p. 38). Research into practices, defined as actions and activities, can also be considered as strengthening the concept of audience agency (Bird, 2010, p. 99).

Within audience research there has been a contradiction concerning qualitative and quantitative approaches (e.g. Schrøder, 2012). In recent years there have been a growing number of examples that combine survey-based data with qualitative information about the subjective meanings of audiences in order to map typologies and patterns of media use (e.g. Courtois, 2012; Hasebrink/Domeyer, 2012; Schrøder, 2012).

Magazines have provided a never-ending source for different kinds of research, e.g. how women are represented in journalistic copy. Whereas news consumption or watching television have been popular topics in the media studies field, reading magazines has not enjoyed the same popularity, even though it has been researched for decades (e.g. Hermes, 1995; Ytre-Arne, 2011b). To obtain information about the reader-magazine relationship, magazine publishers have generally used quantifiable market-driven readership research. Most of these studies do not focus on active meaning making and the experiential practice of being a reader, but more on the interests and social-economic attributes of the reader (Hermes, 2009; Napoli, 2003). Until recently, the media industries have been more interested in audience exposure to media content. Yet as media fragmentation and audience autonomy increase, there is a need to learn more about the changing ways of media use, including reader motivations and content preferences, and to reach a more sophisticated understanding of aspects of audience behaviour (Napoli, 2010, pp. 9,15).

## 3. Engaging with media

Media engagement is defined in several ways. Attention paid, time spent, and emotional connections are all included in the attempts to define the concept, depending on who is doing the defining (Napoli, 2010, p. 96). Engagement is often measured by exposure to content, and, in magazines for example, it is defined by readership frequency, minutes spent with the magazine in question, and the percentage of the issue that was actually read (Napoli, 2010, pp. 100-102).

Media engagement can also be seen as a set of experiences that a user has of a media brand and its content. These experiences can include getting practical tips, feeling a part of an online community or identifying with a columnist (Peck/Malthouse, 2011). Becoming aware of these experiences is necessary in order to understand what makes users to stay with, and return to, certain titles – or alternatively, why they give up reading or following them (ibid. 4–7). The research, however, lacks the dimension of actual user practice, which is also a part of media experiences (Schrøder, 2011, p. 6). For example, reading print magazines in a comfortable laid-back position may be preferred to reading online content while sitting at a table in front of a computer, because the reading position is associated with the need for relaxation (Ytre-Arne, 2011a).

Even though the findings with respect to media engagement in this study are closely connected to individual personal relationships with media titles (subscribing to magazines, following television series), these should not be confused with fandom, which also comprises a set of "affective investments". Engagement should be considered, rather, as a part of a mundane involvement with media and the often arbitrary and unconscious decisions that people make when choosing which media titles they follow (Hermes, 2009, p. 114).

# Methods to study media engagement

In order to study diverse forms of media engagement in the fragmented media environment three or four different, iterative data gathering methods were chosen: online media diaries, Q-sorting interviews, short observations and thinking aloud interviews.

The groups studied were<sup>1</sup>:

 Three 16–19 year-old high school students (one male and two females), living in Helsinki. This was a pilot study to test and develop the first three methods.

2. Ten 16–19 year-old high school students specialising in media studies (eight females and two males), living in Helsinki. All participants wrote media diaries and eight were interviewed using the Q-sorting method. The media use of three participants was observed.

3. Twelve 45–55 year-old female subscribers/former subscribers to the women's magazine Kotiliesi, living in or around Helsinki. All participants wrote diaries. Eight were interviewed using the Q-sorting method and also observed and interviewed using the thinking aloud method.

#### 4.1. Online media diaries

Diaries offer a channel in which participants can express their private thoughts without having to interact with a researcher in an interview situation, or to concentrate and participate in a discussion with a focus group (Kaun, 2010, p. 134). The challenge of writing diaries is the lack of face-to-face communication since the element of physical and visual interaction is missing (Sade-Beck, 2004, p. 46), and thus textual ambiguities may increase. However, diaries are helpful in comparing individual's thoughts about the respective phenomena (Bolger, Davis,/Rafaeli, 2003, pp. 580,587).

The participants were asked to write about their media use, and describe their experiences and practices with media. They wrote their individual diaries for two or four weeks on an online platform. The diaries included a pre-survey of media use in general and two assignments concerning a memorable media experience and the participant's most important media titles.

#### 4.2. *O-sorting interviews*

Q-methodology was designed in the 1930s by psychologist-physicist Stephenson to compare and map the subjective meanings understood by individuals. This method has multiple advantages in audience and reception research: it provides both quantitative and qualitative data and it offers a ready-made frame for collecting material, especially when compared to more traditional interviews. (Davis/Michelle, 2011, pp. 529-532.)

Schrøder (2010) developed and used the method to study individual use of Danish news media. In their research, interviewees were given 25 Q-cards – each card marking a specific news media item – which they arranged on a nine-point grid according to the role of the media in their lives.

In our research the method was modified to cover the whole media landscape, not only one genre. In the individual Q-sorting assignments the participants were shown a card deck of 90 to 250 cards, each representing one media title that had been mentioned in the media diaries. Competing and popular titles were added to the deck by the researcher in order to help the participants to reflect on the process of meaning making. Each participant sorted not only the media titles they had mentioned in the diaries but also all the other titles.

The participants arranged the cards on an eight-point grid that reflected the importance of the media titles for them, and were asked to think aloud during the sorting process. After sorting they were asked more questions, such as: Why do you use this title? In what situations? Where? Do you use other titles for similar purposes? What makes this title important/unimportant? The participants were allowed to reach their own definition of "importance"; it could be daily routine, usefulness of the title or their personal relationship with the title. The discussions in the interviews ranged from memories of media experiences to defining one's identity based on media consumption. The outcomes of the interviews were collected into individual personal media landscapes (see Table 1).

#### 4.3. Observation of time and place of media use

Classic anthropological ethnography is time-consuming, and researchers need to immerse themselves in the culture studied (e.g. Deger, 2011). Nowadays, new, less time-consuming methods have been developed, although the debate about appropriate methodologies continues (Pink, 2006) as various modern ethnographic approaches are sometimes regarded as superficial (Deacon/Keightley, 2011, p. 313). Murphy (2011, p. 348) compares ethnography to a patchwork quilt: there is not one correct ethnographic approach, but multiple ones. Ethnographic data can be gathered from many sources – ranging from photograph albums and diaries, to classic, long-term immersion in the culture under observation.

My approach to ethnography is based on Pink's (2006) ideas about sensory and visual ethnography and short-term ethnographic "visits" which may last only an hour. The main aim is to collect the participant's experiences and give voice to them (Pink, 2006, p. 95). Even if the researcher does not have the time to go deeply into the cultural environment, the different methods assist in the collection of rich data from several viewpoints. An important aspect of ethnographic research is that the process is made visible: this includes the time and the place where the user's media experiences were observed, and the manner in which these were studied and analysed (Murphy, 2011, p. 397).

One favourite medium/media title and its use was chosen for observation by the researcher, based on the participant's own preferences in the previous methodological phases. The aim of the observation was to provide representations of media practices and to investigate the real-life context in which media were used. The observation sessions were short, ranging from 25 minutes to 1

hour. The participants were asked to show and describe the situations in which they would opt for a specific medium/title. During the observation participants were asked to clarify certain issues: How does the location affect your media use? How does other people's presence impact your media use? How does the medium itself, or its use, feel physically? These sensory meanings (see Pink, 2009) could then be tied to the materiality of, for example, a magazine: one's ability to flip through the pages, or take a closer look at the photos.

The limitations of this form of observation, especially bearing in mind the shortness of the sessions, also need to be addressed. Even in one specific place – in this case in homes – media practices can differ widely. Moreover, these processes may be unconscious and the participants may find it difficult to reflect on them in exhaustive detail. In addition, online media use is becoming increasingly mobile and is thus not limited to the home environment.

#### 4.4. Thinking aloud interview

Thinking aloud is a method which is often used in user-interface research. In that field, these interviews provide information about the user's movements across the digital platforms in order to design user-friendly interfaces.

In this research these interviews were conducted with the 45–55 year-old readers of a women's magazine, Kotiliesi, to provide information about the reader's views on the contents of the magazine and how they engaged with them. The participants had already read a specific issue of Kotiliesi before the individual interviews. I first of all asked general questions about the reader-magazine relationship and then the participants leafed through the magazine. As they did so, they were encouraged to think aloud and describe the thoughts and feelings that crossed their minds during the first and subsequent reading of the issue.

Conducting these interviews was useful in order to determine the content that provoked thoughts and emotions, even actions, compared to the content that was considered meaningless.

#### 4.5. Analysis of the data

The methods in this research were used iteratively, and the data was partly analysed between the phases. After completion of the diaries we wrote short descriptions of the participants and chose candidates for the forthcoming methodological phases. Those media titles the participants mentioned in the diaries were entered into a card deck for Q-sorting. Based on the diaries and the interviews, one important medium/media title was chosen for observation.

Table 1: An example of a personal media landscape of a 52 year-old woman. Most important media titles are on the right and less important titles on the left.

Email	TV news	TV news	Online content (hobby)	Online content (hobby)	Online news	Google	Newspaper pullout	Newspaper pullout	National newspaper	TV topical affairs	TV topical affairs	TV topical affairs	Books	Phone calls and SMS								
TV morning show	TV topical affairs	TV documentary	Local freesheet	Local freesheet	Google maps	Online news	Online weather	Hercule Poirot	Vera Standhope	Call the Midwife	Professional magazine TV topical affairs	Professional magazine TV topical affairs	Downton Abbey	TV documentary	TV documentary	TV documentary	Special interest mag	TV talk show	TV documentary	Special interest mag	Kotiliesi magazine	Non-fiction books
Customer magazine	TV news	Online bus routes	TV documentary	TV talk show	TV documentary	Special interest mag	Special interest mag	TV documentary	TV series	TV documentary	Customer magazine	Reality comp. show	Reality comp. show									
Radio show	TV series	News magazine	Kotiliesi.fi	TV Jamie Oliver	Customer magazine	Midsomer Murders	Heartbeat	Upstairs, Downstairs	TV topical affairs	Free newspaper	Radio show	TV series	TV channel	Food programme	Customer magazine	TV documentary						
TopChef Finland	Reality comp. show	TV series	Professional magazine Kotiliesi.fi	TV sports	Teletext	Professional magazine   Midsomer Murders	Customer magazine	TV series	Professional magazine TV topical affairs	TV news	Online news	TV series	Online news									
TV topical affairs	TV series		Radio channel	Mobile games	Web-TV	TV news	Online stores	TV sports programme														
Frasier	Home decoration mag   TV series	Professional magazine Radio channel	Professional magazine Radio channel	Evening paper	Evening paper	Online news	Online news	Wikipedia	Wine magazine	Gilmoren Girls												
YouTube	Local freesheet	General interest mag	General interest mag	Women's magazine	Women's magazine	Online content	TV series	Movies in theatre	Food blog	Blogs	Radio show											

The data was analysed using Atlas.ti. Experiences that caused engagement and disengagement were codified and then cross-analysed with the Q-categories. This revealed the most important experiences of engagement, and also which particular media answered to these experiences in the participant group. Below I will present some of the findings about personal media landscapes and the preliminary findings of media engagement.

## 5. Preliminary findings of media engagement

The diversity of media and individual titles are revealed in the personal media landscapes that were mapped in the Q-sorting. In the lead-user teenager group the number of media titles varied between 37 and 92 (average 66) and in the 45–55 year-old participant group from 84 to 134 (average 101). An example of a personal media landscape can be found in Table 1. The Q-sortings also showed the interconnections between the titles: which titles fulfilled the same purposes – whether it was an interest in fashion or in console games, or a common motivation such as the desire to use media for relaxation.

The fragmentation of the user's attention also becomes apparent in the data. Simultaneous media use was common, especially in the 45–55 year-old participant group. Reading a magazine or a newspaper and watching TV at the same time was a common practice. However, when the media content was sufficiently engaging, concentration did not wander from one medium to another, and other domestic and social activities were also restricted. One participant said: "When Downton Abbey was on, everything else had to stop". This meant that all household work had to be finished and the washing machine could not be on. Sofa cushions were adjusted so that she could relax and focus all her attention on her favourite TV series

#### 5.1. Social media practices are considered engaging

The importance of the social aspects of media use emerged both in the diaries and in the interviews conducted with all participant groups. Discussions with friends and family about current topics, either online or face-to-face, were considered an important activity. For many adult participants, watching TV with one's spouse or children was considered an engaging media experience, and the ritual and social aspects of the experience were sometimes seen as more important than the actual media content.

In the teenage groups many media titles – of TV series or blogs – were chosen based on friend's recommendations, even if they did not exactly meet the user's own interests. Knowing what friends talked about at school and the need to feel as a part of community were good enough reasons in their own right.

Observing the media practices, even for a short while, helped to place these practices in their socio-cultural context. First, the concrete location played a significant role. Secondly, a combination of the spatial layout of the house, the time of the day and the presence of other family members was important when choosing which media to use, when and how. This is what I call a social floor plan. For example, one teenage participant was interested in fashion and beauty related content, and followed it both in magazines, on blogs and on YouTube. When reading her favourite magazine, she shut herself in her own room and lay on her bed and gave the magazine her full concentration. When, however, she wanted to access online content of the same genre she needed to do it publicly. Her family had a shared computer that was located in the living room and her mother might have been looking over her shoulder when she was surfing online. She had to tolerate the prevailing conditions at home or find a more suitable time for accessing online content.

#### 5.2. Engaging with Kotiliesi magazine

Based on the four different methods the current and former subscribers of women's magazine Kotiliesi engaged with the magazine mainly because they found the content relevant, useful, timeless and rich in ideas, and they shared the same values. Kotiliesi offered them inspiring recipes and seasonal topics (which resulted in their keeping the copies for future reference) and profiles of interesting people who were interviewed for their expertise or actions instead of "just being celebrities". Vice versa, the readers felt disengagement if the stories were written from too conservative a viewpoint, did not offer any new information, or if the content was too "unrealistic" or unattainable, such as the appearance of models or stories about overly extravagant house decorations. Current and former subscribers both engaged with the same journalistic content and found the same stories and visuals disengaging.

A major reason for reading Kotiliesi was nostalgia. Most of the participants had memories of the magazine from their childhood when their mothers had subscribed to Kotiliesi. One participant mentioned that subscribing to it for decades was "an emotional matter". Compared to other important women's magazines, Kotiliesi provided information on homely and practical issues but was not seen as a media title to relax with.

#### 6 Further research

People have access to a vast number of media titles. Nevertheless, they still choose to engage with specific media texts on specific platforms on a daily or weekly basis. The results of my study show that the social aspects of media use seem to be the most significant forms of media engagement: homes have social floor plans that affect media use, and the important social practices with family members seem to count more than the actual content of the chosen media.

In order to gain further insight into how readers and users actually engage with media, one needs to take into account a number of aspects that reflect the particular everyday situations in which media are consumed. In any further research it will be important to analyse in much more detail the routines, habits, rituals and practices that are associated with media engagement.

#### Notes

1 This research is a part of a larger Finnish NextMedia project where seven different participant groups' media use was studied.

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# Biography

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