Essay

The Disappearing Audience and Reflexive Visibility

Katerina Girginova

Abstract

Contrary to popular opinion and some academic writing that celebrates the renewed visibility of new media audiences, this essay argues that they are increasingly going into retreat. To understand how new media audiences "disappear" from view of one another, I borrow from Brighenti's typology of visibility and develop the idea of "reflexive visibility." The latter describes the ability to socially orient ourselves in a digital environment through the textual and contextual cues of others—an activity that is of utmost importance not only to researchers wishing to "see" various audiences but also for audiences writ large, wishing to know themselves.

Contrary to popular opinion and some academic writing celebrating the renewed visibility of new media audiences, evidence is mounting to suggest quite the opposite—that new media audiences are increasingly going into retreat. This is a reflexive disappearance and it occurs on several levels. First, it takes place on an interpersonal level, as new media audiences withdraw into deeply idiosyncratic media consumption practices and spaces making them increasingly invisible to one another. Second, it occurs on an institutional level, as new media audiences leave ever more digital traces of their mediated being, which are instantaneously picked up and privatized by media organizations.

Paradoxically, these two points suggest that, despite a proliferation of cross-platform, digital audience activity, and despite an increase in digital data availability, new media audiences are, simultaneously, becoming invisible to one another. In other words, we are losing *reflexive visibility*—a term I use to describe the ability to socially orient ourselves in a digital environment through the textual and contextual cues of others. The result of this loss is not so much a fear that we may be bowling alone (Putnam, 2001) but rather a concern for what happens to us, as members of the public, when we don't know our team.

Of course, new media platforms have offered us plenty of opportunities for visibility as well as for collective and connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). For instance, publics now frequently coalesce around various hashtags for political and performative reasons (Papacharissi, 2014). However, the purpose of this short think piece is to be provocative, to raise some questions, and to consider cases in which reflexive visibility has been obscured.

For example, what happens when Twitter decreases its publicly available application programming interface (API) stream from 10% to 1% of the totality of its Tweets or when Facebook and Instagram privatize their user's activities and content? As researchers of new media processes and practices, our results are only as sharp as our analytical tools, and thus, the retreat of the audience(s) and the consequent difficulties of bringing them into the fore carry implications for audience and media studies alike. Still, and perhaps more importantly, if we are all increasingly a part of some new media audience, visibility becomes important not only for knowing others but also for knowing ourselves. Thus, a move into retreat carries important implications for researchers and audiences; in essence, for us all.

Continuing the conversation Baym (2013) began by asking what types of data do new media metrics conceal, this piece asks *what are the implications of concealed data for the ways that audiences can understand themselves*? Or, put otherwise, what happens when we lose reflexive visibility? To explore this question, I use Brighenti's (2007) typology of

University of Pennsylvania, USA

Corresponding Author:
Katerina Girginova, The Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA.
Email: kgirginova@asc.upenn.edu

visibility as an analytical toolkit and sketch out how new media audiences are becoming obscured, as well as why visibility has taken on new import in our digital media society. Notably, this piece is somewhat ambiguously titled the *dis*appearing audience, which carries with it the possibility for reappearance and, simultaneously, the need for evolution of research practices and new media audience understandings.

Where Did They Go?

At its most basic, social visibility is a form of recognition; it is a fundamental aspect of being human (Simmel, 1969; Taylor, 1989). Although it's questionable whether we've ever really been able to know our mediated audience(s), translating our audience-ness from physical spaces such as the outdoors or theaters to semi-private spaces such as our family living rooms and into private and cross-platform abodes like the various apps on our phones signals that we've gone into a personalized retreat. To better understand this move, we can draw on Brighenti (2007), who makes an appealing argument for researchers to treat visibility as a serious social category and offers us three further classifications to consider: social, media, and control-related visibility.

By retreating into idiosyncratic audience practices, we're becoming *socially* and *reflexively* invisible to one another. For instance, people underestimate their online audience size by about 27% (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, & Karrer, 2013). Incidentally, the idiosyncratic behavior of audiences across devices is still a blind spot for most corporations as well; however, they tend to have more resources at their disposal to combat this problem. Thus, lack of social visibility leads to a form of mis-information. To make matters more complicated, most people online are so-called "lurkers," which further blurs our digital publicness and does not veritably translate into metrics or visibility to one another. The way we then become visible is through some form of publication on digital platforms, which carries implications for the very notion of publicness. The question then becomes what might we lose by not having an accurate idea of our audiences or audience-ness on new media platforms? And what happens when publicness is increasingly defined and enacted through publication?

The second category proposed by Brighenti is *media* visibility. While this category is closely related to social visibility, it focuses more on the mediated logics operating behind how new media audiences become (in)visible. For instance, media visibility is impacted by mobility, speed, and, importantly, the de-contextualization of the audience member from others and from a particular space and time. We already know that an ambiguity "arises from decontextualizing a moment of clicking from a stream of activity and turning it into a stand-alone data point" (Baym, 2013, Section 8); thus, new media and their metrics can paint misleading pictures of publics and their behaviors.

As digital audiences, we only have limited access to other audience members and that access often takes place through various metrics, which leads us to the third category of visibility. While we now live in an era of unprecedented, fine-grained digital traces of ourselves and others, the aggregate of many of those traces do not belong to us—they belong to the platforms upon which we upload them and to those who own the platforms or are able to purchase access to them. Thus, the third type of visibility for consideration is *control*. New media audiences are increasingly hidden behind algorithms and masked in faceless big data statistics. Yet, who is part of a particular statistic—in other words, who hears, sees, or reads us—matters.

As Livingstone (2004) suggests, there are different types of new media visibility that need to be further addressed, and perhaps, reflexive visibility is one of them. Like echo chambers, we already know that social media sites give us a skewed sense of the voice of "others," limited either by our own social networks or by proprietary data. However, unlike echo chambers, the voices we hear of others are determined increasingly algorithmically and institutionally by players and platforms beyond our control.

As early as 1984, Fejes wrote a paper sub-titled *the problem with the disappearing audience* however, his concern was that as more and more research was being "focused toward message content and production, the audience will become more and more invisible in the theory and research of critical scholars" (p. 222). While still a valid concern today, the type of disappearing audience problem this think piece addresses is qualitatively different. The difference being that certain parts of the audience and their behavior are now available—but to a select few.

As Brighenti reminds us, visibility is a metaphor for knowledge. Therefore, it is worth asking what is obscured and to or by whom? If the audience is becoming less visible to itself, this carries important implications for reflexivity and sociability. If, simultaneously, this new media audience is also becoming more visible to marketers and other powerful institutions—and we now see cases of this almost on a daily basis—this too has important ramifications for economic exploitation and surveillance. Indeed, if we assume that new media provide increasingly important platforms, metrics, and mirrors in which digital collectives can "see" themselves and can consume or express opinions, it is worth exploring the consequences of blurry, skewed, or plain opaque glass.

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Author Biography

Katerina Girginova is a PhD Student in Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include media events, audience studies, and innovation.