Measuring the Third World Radio Audience
Modern Audience Research as an Expression of Coloniality of Knowledge

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Abstract

This paper presents a critique of the claims of scientificity and of representing the public interest made by commercial radio audience research in non-western countries. Using Smythe’s characterization of the audience as the main commodity of media, Ang’s description of the limited scope of institutional audience research and Meehan’s genealogy of commercial audience research in North America, we attempt to deconstruct the principles that guide contemporary audience research. We then analyse the way that radio audience research methods are being used in Third World countries, where they are more than a tool for marketers and media industries; they become an example of coloniality, the naturalization of particular discourses based on the supposedly unquestionable principles of modern scientific knowledge. The particular case of the EGM (Estudio General de Medios), the most important audience research study carried out in Colombia and other South American countries, is reviewed.
Radio, Commercial Audience Research and Coloniality

One of the contributions of Media Communication as a discipline to the field of Social Science was the development of audience research methods. The need to get to know and quantify audiences arose in the specific context of the United States where radio, the first electronic medium, was quickly inserted in the logic of Capitalism as a private sphere, a medium financed by advertising and basically regulated by market conditions (Wehner, 2002). This is the reason why some analysts believe that scientific knowledge about audiences has been colonized by very particular discourses and practices to the extent that they have become natural, the virtual synonyms of accurate and modern research. From its very beginning, audience research rarely explored the subjective, complex and dynamic forms of audiencehood to concentrate on quantifying what was believed to be controllable, basically predictable and stable groups of people (Ang, 1993). The figures and percentages aggregated all people supposedly belonging to an audience, a taxonomic collective that could further be dissected into smaller sub-groups. Commercial radio and other media needed this sort of information. Critical scholars starting with Dallas Smythe have repeatedly pointed out the fact that more than research about the actual preferences and practices of audiences, media corporations, both private and public, carry out research to construct audiences as commodities that can be sold to advertisers (Smythe, 1981). Empirical, quantitative audience research seems to provide an objective, systematic and scientific base to define audiences, demonstrate to advertisers the success of the medium in attracting and retaining listeners and secondarily, make programming decisions. It does not matter much that the adequacy of the information obtained is very questionable and that the control that it makes possible over the audience proves over and over to be precarious and provisional. Contemporary commercial radio around the world has become dependent on ‘techno-rational’ practices (Ahlkvist, 2001) like targeted programming and sophisticated developments of the type of quantitative audience research methods used at the beginning of the U.S radio industry.

Is it somehow acceptable and valid to apply these modern research methods developed with very particular purposes and biases across such huge cultural contexts as those found in the so-called Third World? How do you contact and measure audiences in regions of extreme poverty and inequality, language differences, security concerns and constant migrations? What mutations does commercial audience research experiment with when transplanted into unconventional settings? These issues deserve attention from a critical academic point of view and not only with regards to methodological but also to epistemological aspects, that go beyond the political economy focus of Smythe and other western critical scholars.

This paper analyses the way that radio audience research methods are being used in so-called Third World countries, specifically in Colombia; how they are more than a tool for marketers and media industries and have become an example of coloniality: the naturalization of social relations based on the supposedly unquestionable principles of hegemonic modern scientific knowledge that legitimizes information age capitalism.

Desperately Seeking the Audience in the West

Besides the economic reasons offered by Smythe and some of his followers (Meehan, 1993), the rise to prominence of commercial audience research can be explained as a
result of the crisis of the humanistic paradigm of high culture. Elitist discourses that tried to educate the masses through media or run cultural production as a social differentiation and distinction mechanism, entered a period of crisis with the growing popularity and commercial success of mass media. Popular classes found in mass media “some of the basic forms of their own way of perceiving, experiencing and expressing their world” (Martín-Barbero, 1993:159). By bypassing the elite experts of high-culture and contacting, although precariously, what they had constructed as the audience, commercial researchers brought about a regime of truth that was in principle more flexible, conditional and practical than the previous one. Commercial research purported to incorporate elements of the social world of listeners into its discursive realm of visibility. In a self-serving argumentation, audience research and ratings were celebrated as guardians of the public interest, a definite evidence of the media industry willingness to give the audience what it wanted.

Unrest about the results obtained by these methods has been growing in Western countries for some time, even inside the media industry itself (Nelson-Field et al., 2007). Most of the attacks have been levelled at perceived methodological shortcomings like unreliable or too few samples, inaccurate measuring instruments, etc (Ang, 1993). An example of these criticisms are the ones raised against the typical quantitative audience surveys carried out in the United States by Arbitron and in the United Kingdom by RAJAR which rely on a sort of diary to register listening behaviour (Starkey, 2009). Arbitron and RAJAR send a diary booklet on which people in a probability sample are supposed to register their radio listening behaviour in quarter-hour periods. The booklet usually covers a week. The diary keeper is expected to fill his/her diary personally and to recollect his/her radio listening behaviour of the previous day recording the exact times he/she listened to specific radio stations. Arbitron and RAJAR surveys all depend on listener recollection of radio usage patterns, but this usage has been consistently described as diverse and unconscious. Error margins, accumulated audience totals and listener shares critically depend on perfect listener recall of a very unconscious activity. Recent attempts to use electronic portable people-meters have shown that diaries under-report listening times and the quantity of stations actually heard (Patchen and Webb, 2000), and significantly distort the preferences of audiences (Clifford, 2009). Both diaries and portable meters rely on samples that are increasingly difficult to get, even with the offer of monetary incentives. Research companies have had to use steady, trustworthy participants from previous samples, affecting the desirable random nature of the selection process.

Ien Ang’s very influential book Desperately Seeking the Audience explains how institutional audience research allows the production of knowledge in which audiences are constructed as objectified categories of others to be controlled (Ang, 1993). The way that commercial audience research has been institutionalized has led media to remove concrete listeners from its horizon and to commit itself further to what Ang calls an abstracted, taxonomic idea of audience, that structurally impedes radical innovation (Ang 1993). Arbitron’s and RAJAR’s timid attempts at measuring on-line radio audiences do not compensate for the exclusion of outdoor, public space listening or portable device listening in their measurements. The use of music research based on song recognition has been criticized for promoting conservatism in music selection and drawing young listeners away from the dial (Nightingale, 1993). Furthermore,
institutional research loses sight of the intricacies and the richness of the social world of actual audiences and hides most of the infinite, contradictory and dynamic practices and experiences of listeners in their everyday lives.

Nevertheless, commercial audience research has nowadays become an imperative, nearly an obsession, in the world of radio and media in general. This happens even though the audience knowledge constructed through this kind of research is, to say the least, fragmentary, fragile and provisional (Meehan, 1993). Quantitative consumer research is not really concerned with the audience, but with limited characteristics that construct and define consumers; it produces a finite, manageable object out of the irreducible world of audiencehood, but nevertheless leaves its users “in profound ignorance, or at least in great doubt, about the precise ingredients of their success or failure” (Ang, 1993: 27). Understanding the full complexity of the everyday realities of radio reception is considered unnecessary, an annoyance and even counterproductive. Commercial researchers argue that they do not attempt to provide comprehensive accounts of the population, but are interested only in providing advertisers with data about the potential consumers of products inside an audience (Meehan, 1993). But this selective research passes by audience research and is frequently used as solid data to define private and public policy and characterize social trends. An article in *The New York Times* unMASKS the social impact of this type of research:

Change the way you count, for instance, and you can change where the advertising dollars go, which in turn determines what shows are made and what shows then are renewed. Change the way you count, and potentially you change the comparative value of entire genres (news versus sports, dramas versus comedies) as well as entire demographic segments (young versus old, men versus women, Hispanic versus black). Change the way you count, and you might revalue the worth of sitcom stars, news anchors and -- when a single ratings point can mean millions of dollars -- the revenue of local affiliates and networks alike... Change the way you measure America's culture consumption, in other words, and you change America's culture business. And maybe even the culture itself (Gertner, 2005).

Besides the severe economic implications for the media industries, the article assesses the potential impact of commercial audience research on popular culture, an impact that transcends the branding of shampoo or cars. The creative, diverse and complex, even messy relation of people with media is basically ignored and left unexplored, replaced by institutional knowledge that enables the commercial operation of the media industry. Knowledge has become a key element of what could be described as a discursive practice because it transforms elusive areas of reality into discrete, controllable objects. By doing so, audience measurement contributes to create a regime of truth with very clear implications in the everyday practices of the people associated with the radio industry and its listeners.

Feminist scholar Eileen Meehan, in her genealogy of North American audience research, discovered that early studies commissioned to identify consumption habits led radio producers to focus their programming on members of the audience that could become buyers of certain products and to largely ignore the rest of the listening public.
Women were supposed to be at home while men worked. Women were thought to make purchasing decisions over small items while men decided over big investments such as real estate and cars. Programming decisions were based on these simplistic assumptions. Meehan described these first audience segmentations as catering to a caste of consumers, a description that Spaulding explained in this way: “In its attempt to manufacture a saleable audience, the economics of early radio may have legitimized the ideological divide of men’s and women’s programming, and even the domestic division of labor itself” (Spaulding, 2005: 47). Following Meehan, Ang concluded that ratings should not be treated as scientific reports of human behaviour “but rather as products – as commodities shaped by business exigencies and corporate strategies” (Ang, 1993: 54). Her recommendation has been largely ignored; the practice of segmenting people into consumer targets continues to grow and to be naturalized. Listeners are grouped based on ever more abstract categories, the instrumentalisation and commodification of the audience has become a big sector of post-Fordist capitalism, monopolized by corporations like Nielsen that operate in countries all over the world.

As Ang cleverly points out, the move towards a “scientific” way of knowing the audience was not simply “a sign of progress from ignorance to knowledge, from speculation to fact, from belief to truth. Rather, what is at stake here is the politics of knowledge” (Ang, 1993: 10). Ang uses Foucault’s theories to show how, in the case of television audience research (radio and other media are not different in this regard) knowledge and power are closely intertwined. Knowledge about the audience is a technology of control that sustains the operation of commercial radio and its acceptance and naturalization have made its definitions, procedures and results seem unproblematic. Its influence has been so wide that its assumptions and practices are “taken for granted and reproduced in most branches of academic research” (Ang, 1993: 11). Researching audiences has been naturalized into a particular discourse with a particular set of associated practices: that of institutional commercial research. The consequences of their actions and discourses could be significant. “Advertisers are exacerbating social divisions ... by producing «segment-making media» instead of «society making-media». What does the dividing up of the country into ever finer demographic niches do to our notions of national identity, of sharing in a common culture, of needing to understand one another across racial, gendered and generational divides?” (Douglas, 2002: 92). Zygmunt Bauman (1998) offers a plausible answer to this question in his book Work, Consumerism and the new Poor. He argues that we live in times of late modernity, ruled by a logic of consumption that has updated the mechanisms for the production of subjectivity and distinction in order to achieve just one goal: the creation of more efficient consumers. This update has implied moving away from the old mechanisms of social positioning that had classified individuals in rigid social classes with very particular conditions and standards of living. Today’s logic of consumption forces individuals to tirelessly work on the construction of their identities using their ‘freedom’ to choose in the market. This is how social stratifications are built today. On a similar path to Douglas, Bauman identifies a society organized around consumption that divides people in two categories: those who can consume, that are further sub-divided into market segments; and those who cannot consume, people without a function in society, outcasts, degraded socially and exiled internally. This commercialized society has abandoned any pretension of being
inclusive for all its members and has become smaller than the sum of its parts. For Bauman “the seduction of the market is at the same time the great equalizer and the great divider of society” (Bauman 1998, 115). He argues that intensive commodification increases demand and profits but at the same time it enlarges the divide between those who can participate and those who can’t. Audience research is indirectly increasing this divide.

**Coloniality and Audience Research**

Nevertheless, this very particular kind of scientific research continues to expand into areas beyond the Western world. As media companies become global conglomerates, radio stations, TV channels, magazines, newspapers and internet sites around the world try to operate under similar practices. What happens when institutional audience research is carried out in non-Western contexts? What follows is a description of the way that commercial audience research is being carried out in a particular location, Colombia, a country located in the northern tip of South America.

There are different commercial radio audience measurements being made in Colombia but perhaps the most influential is one called EGM (Estudio General de Medios). This study originated in Spain in the 60s and it quickly became the standard by which Spanish media measured success or failure (Callejo, 2001). In the late 90s, the EGM was transplanted from Spain to different Latin American countries, currently it is carried out in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica. In Colombia it was carried out in 1999 for the first time. A separate study called EAR was created in the first years of the 21st century with the goal of increasing the accuracy of the radio ratings in the highly competitive urban markets of Colombia but this study was eventually merged with the EGM in 2007.

In Colombia the EGM takes place twice a year in the six biggest cities and once in eleven other cities. It uses a probability, stratified sample of more than 10,000 people. The margin of error is below 1%. For all its impact, cost and statistical precision, the EGM, as currently applied in Colombia, does have significant weaknesses (Valencia, 2006). The study does not cover small cities or rural areas. The sample only includes populations with medium to high levels of income, those that possess significant purchasing capabilities, discarding a large percentage of the country’s population. The sample is created using statistical over-representation (that is, the percentage of higher income people in the sample is bigger than its actual proportion in the population census) giving more weight to opinions expressed by the wealthier sectors of the population. The EGM only samples people in an age range from 12 to 69 years (Neira, 2005). The government census data from which the sample size was calculated had been out-of-date for a long time: it was based on a census carried out in 1993. The 2005 census, long overdue, was poorly executed and even the government has doubts about some of the data collected. The EGM data collection is made through a structured questionnaire applied face-to-face. To measure radio audience numbers, the interviewer creates the equivalent of a listening diary by asking detailed questions to the person in the sample. The interviewee is supposed to recollect his/her radio listening behaviour of the day before mentioning specific station listening times.
Some Colombian radio networks like RCN, one of the biggest and most profitable in the country, mistrust the results of the EGM even though the study is undertaken by an independent institution called ACIM that is financed by both media companies and advertisement agencies. The top-rated radio stations in Colombia as measured by the EGM may not be the actual most-listened to stations in the country. Nevertheless, results in the EGM force networks to adjust or replace formats, fire announcers and programming directors or increase their wages. The study excludes a large percentage of the Colombian population, places a higher value on the tastes and preferences of the privileged and promotes homogenization by exclusion as we will show ahead.

A study like the EGM is especially disappointing for various reasons. First, because the sample that it used from its inception in 1997 until 2008 only included populations with medium to high levels of income, those that posses significant purchasing capabilities. This bias disregards the fact the radio remains one of the most popular and far-reaching forms of media in Colombia, particularly attracting peasants, internal migrants from the countryside and working-class people in the big cities. Secondly, the ongoing implementation of this type of research across the world carries with it the discourses of the market and the ethnocentrism of its original context, an aspect that has not been thoroughly studied. Latin American Postcolonial scholars criticize the view that supposes that the characteristics of modern western societies are the expression of natural, spontaneous tendencies, part of a normal development trend that should become global, a social order that is not only desirable but also the only one possible (Lander, 2005). “Is there only one world or are there various possible worlds?”, asks Santiago Castro-Gómez in a recent article, “Or to put it in yet another way, is it possible to share a world where different ways of knowing that world can coexist and complement each other?” (Castro-Gómez, 2007: 428). He and other Latin American thinkers criticize what they call the coloniality of knowledge, that is, the naturalization of hegemonic discourses based on the supposedly unquestionable principles of modern western scientific knowledge. Commercial audience research constitutes a clear example of coloniality of knowledge: one discourse about audiencehood, one form of rationality attempts to “[...]radically change the cognitive, affective and volitive structures of the subaltern, and turn him into a new man, based on the model of western man” (Castro-Gómez, 2005). When commercial research is analysed as a tool of coloniality, it becomes possible to understand how the indiscriminate import of supposedly objective methodologies fosters “[...]the epistemic violence exerted over other forms of knowledge, images, symbols and signification modes” (Castro-Gómez 2005). The EGM produces knowledge that self-validates itself as objective, scientific and universal when in fact it is an expression of coloniality. It repeats some of the methodological shortcomings of the studies of Arbitron and RAJR, but makes them even more serious by carrying them out in a context of profound inequality and acute symbolic and physical violence. How do you do probability sampling across communities with different languages, cultural backgrounds and ethnicities? (Lent, 1993) Do you distribute audience diaries through unreliable mailing services to literacy-challenged listeners? Do you hire local interviewers, train them and send them to survey in remote and even potentially dangerous locations? How do you measure an audience of nomadic people or refugees? How do you access extremely rich people that normally hide in secluded locations surrounded by bodyguards?
Behind the figures obtained from complex statistical studies that stations in Western and non-Western countries use to measure audiences, define and adjust their programming strategies and publicize their success in front of their competitors and advertisers, lies a discriminatory economic reality, “the hegemonic discourse of a civilizatory model, an extraordinary synthesis of the assumptions and basic values of liberal modern society” (Lander, 2005: 11). Commercial audience research insists on ignoring the informal methods used by small stations and listeners to communicate: phone calls, letters, e-mails, even visits to station headquarters. These tools are not considered relevant as they are voluntary and do not follow the rules of probability sampling. “Informal” methods are considered misleading and even counterproductive and dangerous. The songs requested by listeners do not fit into the schedules programmed in station automation software and would derail the predefined programming rhythms created through expensive music research. Even the spontaneous intuitions of producers are limited and prohibited, following the same logic that used to define programming in hit radio: “The disc jockey is not representative of the public. Because he is usually above the audience mentally and financially, and lives with popular music, his own preferences are a dangerous guide” (Barnes, 1988: 10). Straightforward communication with the audience, unmediated by expert discourse is considered archaic, pre-modern and inferior.

Clearly building on its roots in consumer research, institutional research like the EGM does not address questions about the changing dynamics of radio listening in Colombian society and basically ignores the exploration of the role of radio in what Ana Maria Ochoa (2006) describes as the intensification of the aural that seems to be taking place around the world, and could have a higher magnitude in Latin America. Ochoa describes this as an aural region:

I argue that under the contemporary processes of social globalisation and regionalization coupled with the transformations in the technologies of sound, the (Latin American) public sphere is increasingly mediated by the aural (Ochoa Gautier, 2006: 807).

Even though Colombia’s urban population has embraced mp3 and iPod devices, internet cafes are to be found all around, and television sets are available in most houses, apartments, small restaurants and coffee shops, the love affair between Colombians and radio continues to thrive. Equating audience research with commercial studies like the EGM “will only make us lose sight of the intricacies of the social world of actual audiences” (Ang, 1993: 14). Accepting the very questionable results of the EGM, results that over-represent affluent populations, means sanctioning exclusion. It also means overlooking the complex dynamics of media reception and the very significant role that radio plays as part of the contemporary Latin American mediascape. Radio has been described by region scholars as a key space for legitimating popular music, reconciling nations horizontally across diverse geographies and vertically across class barriers (Martin-Barbero 1993). Reliance on institutional research and the knowledge that it produces, is a threat to the very survival of radio, it turns the medium into an arid marketing channel and breaks what has been a longstanding love affair with its audience.
The pernicious effects of the introduction and expansion of institutional research can be observed in the changing practices of the other types of radio stations that exist in Colombia. Public and college radio stations, although constrained by limited budgets, are now buying expensive private studies like the EGM or carrying out ‘formal’ research themselves. Community stations operating in small towns scattered throughout the country and financed by international cooperation institutions are being pressured to carry out quantitative audience research to prove that their programming is reaching specific populations such as war refugees or female heads of household. Even religious radio stations are increasingly taking a look at the results of the EGM to find out how they are doing against their ‘competitors’.

**Conclusion**

The arrival of commercial audience research to the so called Third World is promoting radio programming strategies that exclude large sectors of the population and ignore the multiple and amazingly rich everyday reception listening practices of people. The expert knowledge that sustains radio audience research is a key element in a chain of representation and production of subjectivity that could be linked to modern, Eurocentric discourses and criticized as an expression of coloniality of knowledge. Behind the figures obtained from statistical studies that stations use to define or adjust their programming strategies and to publicize their success in front of their competitors and advertisers, supposedly solid figures that do not elicit much suspicion and seem objective, lies a complex economic reality, and deeper: the discourse of a civilizatory model, a synthesis of the assumptions and basic values of liberal modern society. Commercial audience research turns into a naturalization instrument that provides legitimacy to the hegemonic discursive order and promotes social control. From a Latin American critical perspective, the introduction and expansion of supposedly scientific commercial audience research is an example of the postmodern reorganization of coloniality and its epistemological hierarchies.

Never before was it so important and necessary to: “develop alternative means of knowledge and to question the colonial/eurocentric character of social research about Latin America, the regime of separations that this research is based on and the very same idea of modernity as a universal civilizatory model” (Lander, 2005:.27).

Finally, we hope that we have been able to highlight the importance of reflexively questioning the assumptions and discourses that propel us as academics to study audiences. Although our goals and procedures normally seem to differ from those of marketing and commercial research, our concern with their discursive practices could result in a lack of awareness of the means by which our criticism may also be part of an insidious instrument of power (Hook 2001). Academic and scientific knowledge has never been nor is neither innocent nor neutral; as a matter of fact it was academics that developed the concepts and procedures at the root of studies like the EGM.
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