

Audiences as Spect-Actors in the Viewership of Television Dramas: Reading Makutano Junction and Siri

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Abstract

Audience research is gradually transforming and expanding in its scope from focusing on the traditional role of audiences as passive and vulnerable readers, listeners and viewers to considering audiences as active consumers and (re) producers of meaning in mass mediated messages (Davis & Michelle, 2011). Against the common perception of audiences as a homogenous category, this paper conceptualizes audiences as heterogeneous and focuses on the role that audiences play in the process of meaning making basically based on their individual knowledge(s), experiences and subjectivities otherwise called 'reading positions' that are accountable for the multiple readings of a single text. I consider how audiences make sense of the frames of HIV/AIDS based messages in *MJ* and *Siri* considering their roles as active (re)producers of meaning in the communicative event. I base this discussion on audience responses from post viewing discussion sessions of selected episodes of the two television dramas. With particular emphasis on how audiences 'read' HIV/AIDS based messages, audience subjectivities I argue accounts for the polysemic nature of texts' meaning and that it is not a short coming but rather a contributing factor towards the richness of the meaning making process of a media text.

Keywords: *Active audiences, polysemy, HIV/AIDS, entertainment-education*

Introduction

The tradition of active audience research emerged as a response to media and cultural studies that emphasized dominant ideology, (Hall, 1980) and media imperialism, (Liebes & Katz, 1990), that gave very little attention to the capacity of audiences as the ultimate consumers of media messages to actively engage with the texts. Active audience research therefore introduced heterogeneity and activity as key terms that characterize audiences against the traditional perception of audiences as homogenous, passive and a vulnerable category that is prone to exploitation by the producers of the message. In active audience research, more attention is given to audiences as active participants in the communicative process in which meaning is actively constructed rather than being passively accepted or perceived by audiences. Meaning is achieved

through a process in which audiences engage with and generate their own meanings based on a range of factors that define them as consumers and re-producers of meanings

In this paper, I trace the priming of the role of audiences in performance studies to two Brazilian educationists: Augusto Boal in his development of the philosophy that led to the birth of 'Theatre of the oppressed' (1979) and Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970), whose philosophies have largely impacted active audience research. Based on a teacher-student relationship, Freire is against the traditional pedagogy that treats the student as an empty vessel that passively receives information from the teacher and argues for a pedagogy that treats the learner as an active co-creator of knowledge. This approach, Freire argues allows people to be aware of their situations and incompleteness as an oppressed group which makes them to work towards being 'more human', and finally to their own liberation, a process he calls conscientization in which education is used consciously to shape the society. Freire disapproves what he terms as the 'banking model' where the teacher considers himself more knowledgeable and therefore deposits and bestows knowledge upon the student who is regarded as an empty vessel. The student becomes a depository and passive receptor of information from the teacher. This situation he argues does not allow for the development of critical consciousness on the part of the student, a consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world, (Freire, 1970). Freire therefore argues for active involvement of the student in their own liberation process.

In Boal's theatre of the oppressed, a form of theatre in which all barriers between actors and audiences are destroyed, passive spectators are turned into active participants who do not just think about alternative solutions but that they also try them out on stage as rehearsals for social revolution. Boal's ideas of active audiences in a theatrical performance further lays basis of our discussion of 'active audiences' whom I regard as key participants in a communicative event. In the form of theatre which Boal advocated for, members of the audience actively participated in the performance by occasionally stopping it and suggesting particular actions for the performers and in some cases members of the audiences themselves would take up the roles of the actors and re-enacts the scenes. In this the spectator then becomes a spect-actor by assuming the role of the actor. The aim of Boal was to offer tools for liberation using theatre. The idea behind this interaction between audiences and actors was to change the nature of performance from monologue which was perceived as being oppressive on the part of the audiences (in the sense that they did not have a role to play apart from merely being the consumers) to dialogue which involved engagement between audiences and actors and between audiences and the actions.

The idea of monologue being oppressive in Boalian and Freirian senses have to do with the inability of the spectators and the student to actively participate in the transformation of their worlds through their own interpretation and reactions by generating critical appraisals of the messages. I find the ideas of Boal and Freire important in this discussion in terms of helping us conceptualize active audiences. My sense of active audience is however not limited to the actual assumption of the role of the actor by the spectator. I view audiences as being involved in active dialogue with the texts on a critical level with some degree of awareness both of themselves as audiences (watching) and as actors by virtue of the fact that the stories are about their everyday life issues and are therefore directly addressing them.

Of great importance to our discussion is that the process of observing and criticizing the characters, their actions and the messages sent through the TV dramas results in multiple ways of looking at situations therefore enabling different perspectives. This for us results in emancipatory dialogue that is characterized by contesting and negotiating meanings from the text. Engagement through dialogue then becomes a liberative process for the audiences because it affords them an opportunity to 'rework' the texts and (re)interpret the messages in their own ways other than that intended by the producer.

By engaging in dialogue, an aspect which Boal conceived as being a 'healthy dynamic of all humans' people would actively engage in transforming their lives through active participation in such theatrical performances. In this the actor does not passively consume the performance but he makes the performance by becoming part of it. Through active participation, audiences became empowered to imagine changes, practice the changes, reflect collectively on the suggestions made and became empowered to generate social change that is relevant for their everyday lives. The audience therefore ceases to be a passive spectator and becomes a spect-actor that is actively involved in the process of his emancipation since for Boal, theatre was (is) a way through which oppression was challenged. This article follows Boal's conception of the audience as a spect-actor, who through active engagement with the characters, the narratives and the performance achieve /generate meaning(s) in a text.

One efficient avenue of health communication includes the use of entertainment forums in the form of soap operas and television dramas that have become important platforms for discoursing and initiating dialogue around a range of pertinent issues including HIV/AIDS (Njogu, 2005, Rogers and Singhal, 1999, Obregon, 2005). Researches on the use of the education entertainment strategy in health communication are embracing the focus on audience reception as a key component in the evaluation of the effectiveness and ultimately the (re) production of such programmes, (Obregon, 2005). In such studies, the audience as 'consumers' of media messages are conceptualized as being actively involved in the production and communication process through the way they negotiate meaning making marking a movement away from the view of audiences as objects of manipulation but as active agents of change who have the capacity to read meanings into texts.

Makutano Junction and Siri

Mj and *Siri* are local educational programmes that were aired weekly on Kenyan television whose series are carefully crafted to function as communication tools. The programmes are not only entertaining but also have rich and relevant educative lessons. The programmes are inspired by the struggles and joys of everyday life and their plots revolve around such matters as access to health care, girl child education, micro-financing and practical income generating projects among other issues. The two programmes do not exclusively deal with matters of HIV/AIDS and are therefore not

based on AIDS messaging but focus on a range of societal and developmental concerns including HIV/ AIDS. The choice of the programmes for this particular article was based on the use of the genre of television dramas to talk about HIV/AIDS as a way of combating the pandemic. Notably, the popularity of the programmes has everything to do with the programmes' use of the everyday life to perform its dual function of educating (in this case demystifying the HIV/AIDS pandemic) and entertaining. Their success is attributable to the use of familiar characters' with whom audiences can develop participatory relationships (Okuthe, 2010). At the heart of this modern genre is the desire to shape people's opinions by prompting viewers to reflect on their lives and prepare for change. This as it shall be discussed in the following chapters is of interest to the study for two important reasons. First is because of the ability of media to construct HIV/ AIDS as a social phenomenon and due to its powerful influence on audiences prioritize certain understandings over others. Second is the multifaceted nature of the HIV/AIDS pandemic which begs for a multi-dimensional approach towards the decoding of such messages which means that a specific message could mean several meanings depending on production and the consumption levels of the communicative process.

Audiences' Moments of Meaning-Making

Audiences are defined based on how they relate with mediated texts, be it print, audio or visual and on how they make use of these texts. The audience refers to a series of relationships that are established among the media and the public (Livingstone, 1991). Studies that treat the audience as passive consumers view them as being uncritical and gullible individuals easily influenced and led by whatever they read, saw or heard in the media. There has however been a growing interest to understand active audiences and their contribution to meaning making in the communicative process (Obregón, 2005). Focusing on audiences as a heterogeneous group of people who have diverse needs presents an understanding that people experience life differently and that these differences influence the meanings that members of audiences draw from viewing the same programme.

The audience is not a homogenous category that is easily identifiable for observation and analysis often referred to in singular terms (Moores, 1993). Rather, it consists of a plurality of 'audiences' with diverse social and cultural contexts that characterize its inherently fluid and unstable nature (Awan, 2008: 29). This fluidity of audiencehood is further heightened by the different points of view that each member of an audience adopts during 'moments' of viewing. Based on this, reception is a diverse process. It is diverse in the sense that audiences do not receive messages in a uniform manner by virtue of the fact that they themselves are a heterogeneous group. Audience members are constituted out of the entire set of social production relations which is diverse in nature (Mosco & Kaye, 2000). Of particular importance in the consideration of the plurality of audiences is the nature of audiences themselves as individuals, the audience activities of the participants in the media and the media space or time of the event (Ross & Nightingale, 2003) as factors accountable for different readings of a text. This among other issues account for the oppositional and negotiated meanings otherwise regarded as 'misreadings' of the dominant meaning.

Following Stuart Hall's seminal essay on 'encoding/decoding', that conceptualizes a communicative experience as involving three processes; production, circulation and consumption that are organized by a structure of dominance, the producer as an institution encodes the intended/preferred meaning to be decoded by the audience in three possible ways. Hall's approach accommodates audience diversity through the possibilities of audiences decoding the message through dominant, oppositional or negotiated readings. For Stuart Hall, the dominant reading encoded by the producer of the message

has an ideological agenda for reproducing hegemonic beliefs and practices within the society (Obregon, 2005). Based on their reading positions audiences can adopt the message or contest the dominant meanings or negotiate meaning. In negotiating meaning, members of the audience attempt to achieve a balance between their lived experiences and that which is fictionalized. This view is in line with a majority of reception theorists who posit that media messages always have a range of possible meanings and interpretations; others are read into by the audiences.

An imagined audience creates a sense (through imagination) of the kind of audience that one is communicating with and therefore the kind of message to put across. 'Imagined audience' is here used as in Benedict Anderson's sense in *Imagined Communities*, to allude to the role that imagination plays in conceptualizing the nation into existence (Anderson, 1991). Audiences also do exist by imagination. The media creates/imagines a community that it addresses as 'audience' which they intend to serve through communication. Regardless of the many disparities that define individual members of the community, the audience is conceived as a 'group' that is framed by the ultimate goal of using the media to achieve a particular end. Consequently, the producers' conceptualization of the kind of the target audience determines the kinds of frames used in communicating messages. Given the fact that audiences are comprised of different people whose difference determine their attendance to television watching, I seek to understand how their differences as individual members of the community of audiences determine their engagement with the texts examined.

Responses from various post viewing discussions of specific episodes showed the presence of disparity and diversity in terms of the meaning that audiences drew from the programme. The diversity of the nature of their responses informs this paper. With reference to this diversity, Ang, argues that 'textual meanings in media texts do not reside in texts themselves. A certain text can come to mean different things depending on the interdiscursive context in which viewers interpret it' (Ang, 1996: 18). Esrock's position concurs with this when he points out that '...although media institutions disseminate texts, whether for information or persuasive purposes, ultimately individuals are the consumers of those texts. And ultimately, individual perceptions and interpretations reveal the true meaning, no matter what may have been intended (Esrock, 2005: 249 quoted in Davies and Michelle, 2011).

According to Ang (1996) textual meanings do not reside in texts themselves but are dependent upon how viewers interpret them based on their contextual predispositions. I am however of the view that texts have a dominant or rather preferred meaning (encoded) in them from which audiences generate other possible meanings. Oppositional, negotiated or accepted readings of the preferred meaning I argue accounts for the polysemic nature of texts. The meaning of a text, therefore is created as a result of the interaction between the text and the reader. Because texts are polysemic and therefore open to readers' pluralistic readings this does not necessarily mean that the texts are void of meaning in themselves. In essence, the meaning of a text is shaped by among other factors the producers' intended meaning and the audiences' reading position. Based on this, I show how moments of meaning making becomes an interactive process in which audiences bring 'aboard' their pre-existing knowledge and beliefs, biases and subjectivities into the reading process.

Audience responses from two post-viewing discussions show that audiences do not necessarily adopt the preferred meaning but that they negotiate and re-

interpret meanings. Respondents acknowledged that apart from the programme having reinforced their knowledge about sexual irresponsibility and its link with HIV/AIDS, some respondents for instance tended to disagree with the possibility of one having multiple concurrent sexual partners and test negative for HIV as is presented by in *Siri*. In this particular episode Tom who is a farm manager has three other mistresses besides his wife Beth. While the focus of *Siri* here might have been on the possibility of discordance among married couples, the respondents found the presentation of Tom as testing negative and that of Beth being positive problematic. The use of paradox here as a framing strategy presented some problems to some members of the audience with regard to the kind of message that one drew from watching this episode. The respondents indicated that:

How is it possible that they give us a married man (Tom) who is sexually irresponsible has three other women apart from his wife making them four in number and after doing the test, he is the one who turns negative and the wife tests positive. Is it possible? (FGD 1 female respondent)

It actually tells us something about what we think about this thing HIV. One is that it is not necessarily because of having so many women as has been shown here. The other is that we should think beyond sex, men, relationships .and HIV, there are other ways. What I mean is that this example is a deliberate mistake if you will allow me. So that people will stop thinking obviously. That promiscuity among men leads to AIDS. In

some cases one might be lucky and escape. You might even find that this woman is the suspect. (FGD 1 male respondent)

By contesting certain positions adopted by the programme and pointing out the deliberate mistakes of the producer, audiences are resisting the preferred readings as intended. Such contradictions and contestations account for the richness of a text in terms of the meanings it generates. This dialogue for instance shows that audiences have sufficient knowledge about the relationship between sexual behavior and the risk of HIV. By posing the possibility of being sexually promiscuous and testing negative, the audiences afford themselves an opportunity to challenge common misconceptions that view women as vectors and passive receptors of HIV. For the producer, such episodes are aimed at prompting audiences to think beyond certain givens. This in effect leads to audience engagement with mediated messages at advanced levels that defy audiences' positions as being just passive consumers. Message effect in this case does not occur in isolation but that a person's view of the message is conditioned by a larger web of issues and knowledge that determine the nature of the final interpretation of the message.

Another case that members of the audiences seemed to contest is that the hegemonic or rather dominant meaning in the programme had to do with the presentation of AIDS as a death sentence. In this episode, Jack who was engaged in multiple sexual relationships and knows that he has AIDS narrates to the audience how he contracted the HIV virus and is now preparing to die. After having desperately sought treatment from traditional healers without success, Jack has returned home to die. The next scene of the episode focuses on Jack's funeral. The participants believed that that was too soon and that he ought to have been given a chance. They noted that:

The death sentence! What I saw here was that having HIV is like a death sentence. Jack knows that he has AIDS and that he will die soon. He has no motivation to live. It might be the bitter truth but we should see him living his second chanced life because he knows his status, not preparing to die. In doing this, he is busy discouraging those who have it, telling them that they are dead already. (FGD 1 male respondent)

But I think it is the reality. We all relate AIDS with death. (FGD 1 male respondent 2)

But we also know of people who have had it (AIDS) for over twenty years. They are not dead. For me, the programme is preaching a wrong message. (FGD 1 female respondent)

Well, I object. I think it is part of the project of the programme to caution people about the risks of HIV by showing the consequences as they are. Human beings believe when they see things happening. So by showing them how Jack became ill how he is suffering all the way to his death, I think it does a lot of teaching. It is a warning. (FGD 1 female respondent 2)

With regard to condom use there is an acknowledgement by the youth respondents that participated in the study that condoms are an important part of their everyday life. For them, being a youth is an adventurous moment in life that demands that one is keen on protection. Majority felt that college life was tempting and so condoms were handy. One male respondent indicated that;

Truth is we are in the age of exploration and discovery. It is very safe if we carry along with us some protective gear (condoms) given that HIV/ AIDS is real. One cannot know who has it and who does not. By the time I settle (marry) I should still be alive and free (from HIV). Condoms for me are protective. That's it and what the programme is trying to say is protect yourself because abstinence and even faithfulness is failing, it is almost impossible (FGD 2 male respondent).

Adult respondents in the study showed an association of condoms with protection but that one had moral and religious obligations that do not condone condom use. There was partial agreement with the role of the programme in popularizing the subject of condoms and condom use through the church. They indicated that;

From the programme the church is seen to be resisting condom use yet HIV infections are on the rise. There needs to be support from the church to promote condom use. I mean cases where the church campaigns for the use of rubber as one way of preventing infection. I believe they really do. (FGD 1 male respondent)

My church would not hear a mention of condoms because this is mean for people who are not married and do not know God. Why do you use a condom with your wife? My church preaches monogamous fidelity and being faithful to your partner though we know that those things (sexually risky behaviors) are happening in the church... (FGD1 male respondent)

I do not quite agree with you here... condoms are for protection no matter what, whether in the church or not. We are human. You could use it to protect your partner even from an unwanted pregnancy. (FGD1 female respondent)

Oh yes. But from this perspective, I feel the church should look at it in another way... say, as supporting the fight of this deadly monster AIDS and not for promoting immorality. (FGD 1 male respondent)

From the responses above, television entertainment audiences are profiled along socio-cultural contexts that are defined by the presence of varied 'norms, beliefs, degree of interpersonal connectedness and selective interpretation' (Singhal and Rogers, 1999: 207) which to a larger extent determine how audiences respond to such programmes. Because of this, 'viewers make oppositional or unintended readings of the programme content in accordance with its perceived accuracy or relevance to their social and cultural circumstances' (Kingara, 2011: 177). Based on their different viewing positions, audiences engage and interact with the text to realize meanings beyond what the producers intended. By adopting different viewing positions, television audiences are 'empowered' to see what they want to see and by that, making viewership a personal venture in which audiences benefit from what they think is relevant to their lives by contesting and resisting preferred or dominant reading.

Audiences and Empowerment

Within the broader sphere of media and sustainable development, audience research helps in understanding how advocacy through television dramas empowers audiences by affording them the opportunity to engage in issues that touch directly on development. In this case, the HIV/AIDS scourge as a development concern has been a hindrance to sustainable development by reversing the hard gained social and economic achievements. The perceived impact of HIV/AIDS has shifted from one of a disease affecting individuals to a disease which potentially affects the development of the affected nations adversely.

While HIV/AIDS in Kenya indicate a decline in HIV prevalence country wide (Kenya AIDS Indicator Survey 2008), there is still the need to address issues considered as the major drivers of the pandemic. Apart from reaching larger audiences, mass media has been lauded for its capacity to effectively tackle such issues (Singhal and Rogers 1999). Of great importance is how television dramas as tools of empowerment through their utile function can educate audiences by providing correct and reliable information to the society about the risks of contracting the deadly virus, how to care for the infected and the affected and prevention of further re-infection and the elimination of stigma and discrimination of those affected. While providing information is key, there is need to focus on the role of such 'edutainment' programmes in providing models that will initiate positive social and behavior change as well as shift

norms and values that could be responsible for the continued spread of the HIV pandemic.

Given the noble role of media forums as possible catalysts of dialogue around such difficult matters as HIV/AIDS, a consideration of how audiences respond to mediated messages marks a pivotal step in ensuring developmental progress by creating enabling environments for demystifying HIV/AIDS and equipping people with proper and relevant information that will help curb further spread of the pandemic and reduce stigma and discrimination.

Conclusion

Audiences are active agents in the construction of meaning so much so that without the audience, the communicative moment ceases to exist from the active audience research point of views (Levine, 2003). As active and critical 'users' of messages, audiences contest the long held belief that television in and of itself is a powerful (hegemonic) tool that is 'lesson filled' (Kingara, 2011:

183) and serves to project its ideals to the viewers who passively accept the messages. Following this discussion, the audience is in essence not conceived as passive, complying and vulnerable but rather as rational, selective and actively engaged in the communicative process. As has been pointed out earlier in this discussion, our sense of an active audience is not conceived as Boals' where audiences take to the stage and play the roles of the actors but that audiences here have the freedom to actively interrogate the text and look at it from many possible angles including those not intended by the producer. Audiences do not sit and spectate but they are actively engaged in the (re)production of the text. For Hobson, the essence of a television programme lies with the consumer because 'television programmes are made by their creators, producers and performers but a programme only really exists as a process of communication when it is watched or consumed by the audience' (Hobson, 1982: 152-153).

This creative moment is important in this discussion for it defines the process in which the audiences' role shifts to active participation in the communicative process. In the process of watching/reading television, audiences engage in different 'tactics of consumption' to realize divergent ways of seeing and doing things (de Certeau, 1984).

As a cultural institution, television imagines a certain outlook of its audiences, and makes attempts at fulfilling them. By questioning certain positions assumed by and presented in *Mj* and *Siri*, audiences present some level of consciousness about the role of television in ordering and structuring everyday life. Being an audience affords one the opportunity to critique and resist 'unfavorable'

representations pointing to the fact that viewership in edutainment programmes is not about merely focusing on entertainment but that it extends to considering its utility in enhancing people's lives. In the light of audiences 'checking' on the performance of television, Obregon argues that 'issues of everyday life, meaning and cultural mediations emerge as central elements of the ongoing conflictive interaction that takes place between media and their audiences, a process that for instance goes beyond the mere act of watching television and is extended to people's daily life' (Obregon 2005: 262). Notably, audiences' engagement leads to dialogue whether with oneself or another which ultimately is a learning process that promotes change and action and in this the passive spectator becomes a spect-actor in the Boalian sense.

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